

# Introduction: Covid-19 and the Racialization of Migrants in the Global South

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## Abstract

This introduction reviews existing literature on the racialization of migrants during pandemic times and outlines the major contribution of the papers in this collection to the literature on race, pandemics and South-South racialization. This Special Issue shifts the setting from the Global North to the Global South in examining the racialized experiences of Asian and African migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic, presenting case studies drawn from South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Bangladesh and Argentina. It attempts to bridge the gap between race and migration studies by highlighting the multifaceted ways in which the Covid-19 pandemic disrupts, perpetuates and reconfigures existing social hierarchies and unequal power relations in the Global South. It also highlights the historical and structural contexts that shape processes of racialization along multiple axes of social inequality, such as class, gender, nationality, language, religion, citizenship and immigration status.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, South-South racialization, race, migration, Global South

## Introduction

The global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 not only led to the closure of national borders and a near suspension of international mobility, but also to a resurgence of social 'othering' and related racist and nationalist narratives and practices. Following the historical pattern of marginalized and racialized social groups being blamed for disease (Chamberlain 2020), the pandemic has been accompanied by a global uptick of racism and xenophobia against various groups of migrants and minorities, particularly those who look Chinese or East Asian (Wang et al 2021; Yeh 2020). While much has been written on how migrants are racialized and stigmatized in the Global North, little is known about racism and xenophobia against migrants in Asia, Africa and Latin America during the Covid-19 pandemic. This special issue examines migrants' diverse experiences of racialization specifically

in the Global South. The papers highlight how (post-) colonial continuities and the specificity of local historical, political, legal and cultural contexts generate new forms of racialization during Covid-19 time based on the intersections of class, gender, nationality, citizenship and ethnicity.

In their study of the racialization of labour in Chinese enterprises in Africa, Sautman and Yan (2016) propose a model of South-South racialization that is markedly different from the racialization of labour in the Global North. They argue that racialization between Chinese and Africans is a co-constitutive process which involves multiple racializers, such as Chinese employers, African workers, Chinese in China, elite Africans, western politicians and the media. This special issue rethinks the concept of South-South racialization in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic when the intensified use of digital platforms and

social media facilitates new virtual mobility and boundary (un)making practices. Rather than reifying the North/South binary, we critically reflect on the interconnectedness of the racialization of migrants in the Global South and the Global North. We understand racialization as a dynamic historical process that is mediated by social and institutional structures both locally and transnationally, such as local state lockdown policies, global capitalism, postcolonialism and diaspora politics. We argue that the Covid-19 pandemic not only intensifies and transforms existing social hierarchies and regimes of mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), but also accentuates and changes pre-existing patterns of racialization in the Global South. Additionally, we highlight the emergence of social media as a major site of racialization and anti-racist grassroots mobilization.

### **Race, Racism, and Racialization**

According to Roger Sanjek, 'Race is the framework of ranked categories segmenting the human population that was developed by western Europeans following their global expansion beginning in the 1400s' (1994: 1). While it is important to acknowledge the western colonial origins of race and racism, scholars also call attention to the reproduction and transformation of racial meanings in new historical contexts such as transnational migration, global capitalism, immigration control and nation-building, multiculturalism, and diversity (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Mullings 2005; Omi and Winant 1994; Thomas and Clarke 2013). In addition to this historical dimension, scholars also note the importance of the social and cultural contexts in mediating the transnational circulation of racial knowledge, especially the intersection between indigenous concepts of group differentiation and western racial ideologies (Guridy 2010; N. Kim 2008; Lan 2012; Stam and Shohat 2012). In his classic work *Black Folk Here and There*, St. Clair Drake (1987) exposes the limitations of the US context in theorizing race and racism by examining the multifaceted nature of blackness in various non-western cultures.

Kowner and Demel (2015) argue that modern constructions of race in East Asia and the West have been the outcome of ongoing interactions and of the exchange of knowledge between the two regions.

To capture the dynamic and intersectional nature of racial meanings, various scholars point to the important concept of racialization. Omi and Winant define racialization as 'the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group' (1986: 64). Murji and Solomos regard racialization as 'a core concept in the analysis of racial phenomena, particularly to signal the processes by which ideas about race are constructed, come to be regarded as meaningful, and are acted upon' (2005: 1). The historically and culturally specific nature of racial meanings points to the need to de-centre the western notions of race and racism and to examine racism and racialization in its plurality of forms. In his study of labour relations in pre-war Hawai'i, Jung (2002) criticizes a unidimensional definition of racism that is based primarily on the superiority/inferiority binary. He argues that Japanese and Filipino workers face different racisms, one based on presumed racial inferiority (Filipinos), the other on potential disloyalty to the American nation (Japanese). Bonnett (2018) uses the term 'multiple racializations' to capture diverse racialization processes in different parts of the world and their intertwining with multiple modernities.

In this Special Issue, we study the shifting meanings of race and racism in post-colonial non-western societies, where racist institutional structures were either absent or had been significantly undermined due to decolonization, anti-racist movements and nation-building projects in the Global South. In doing so, we bring three bodies of literature into dialogue: those on the racialization of migrants in the Global North, the racialization of migrants in the Global South and racialization during pandemics. Finally, we explain the contribution of this collection of papers to theories of South-South racialization.

### Racialization of Migrants in the Global North

In the countries of the 'Global North', processes of racialization have mostly been described in relation to populations with an immigrant background. However, constellations of, awareness of and the terminologies used to talk about racialization vary across regions and countries. The US context is shaped by the historical legacy of slavery and the socio-economic polarization between 'black' African Americans and 'whites', while Asian Americans have commonly been framed as a 'model minority' (Prashad 2000). In many European countries the steadily changing discourses on and patterns of migration are marked by different framings and contexts. In France, for example, the republican tradition has become associated with a denial of racialized social differences in the country, whereas in Germany the debate is dominated by the notion of ethnicity, and the uptick in Islamophobia has led to new debates and targets of racialization all over Europe. Erel et al. (2016) find that literature that engages with racism often stresses the continuities of racialized constellations and the distinctions between citizens and non-citizens that are embedded in European migration regimes. At the same time, such scholarship highlights the differential nature of such racialization processes in the context of specific groups of migrants from different national backgrounds, and of additional characteristics such as class, gender, and religion.

Grosfoguel et al. (2015) make distinctions between three main sorts of racialization that target different groups of immigrants in the Global North. What they frame as the 'colonial/racial subjects of empire' are those groups that were directly colonized by a given country and subsequently racialized and placed in an inferior position vis-à-vis the colonizers. In today's social hierarchies, such groups are often at the bottom of social hierarchies in the countries of the Global North, even when they hold citizenship in these countries. The second category includes 'immigrants' 'who are racialised as "white" and experience upward social mobility in the first or second generation.' Examples of this group

include intra-European migrants or migrants from other regions of the world but of European origin, 'such as Euro-Australians, or Euro-Latinos, Euro-Africans, Eastern Europeans, etc.' (ibid. 642). However, such groups often experienced discrimination during the initial stages of their migration and had to go through a process of 'becoming white' (Roediger 1992; Guglielmo 2003). The third category are 'colonial immigrants' or 'those migrants coming from peripheral locations who, although never directly colonised by the (...) country they migrate to, at the time of arrival are "racialised" in similar ways to the "colonial/racial subjects of empire" who were already there.' They thus experience a similar process of 'racial inferiorisation' and often share similar socio-economic positions, even though they 'may have higher class backgrounds than the "minorities" or "migrants" that are among the "colonial/racial subjects of empire"' (Grosfoguel et al. 2015: 643).

In the context of the United States, recent scholarship on race and migration has been attempting to move beyond the black and white binary to examine the interconnectedness of multiple minority experiences in a hierarchical racial structure that is marked by white supremacy (Almaguer 1994; Lan 2006; Lee 2003; Ngai 2004). One prominent example is literature focusing on interracial tensions between African Americans and migrants from Asia. In her study of Korean/Black relations in New York City, C. Kim (1999) notes a process of the racial triangulation of Asian Americans marked by two major axes: that of superior/inferior and that of insider/foreigner. While Asians are considered superior to Blacks and inferior to Whites, they are also racialized as forever foreigners vis-à-vis Blacks and Whites, who are constructed as naturalized members of the American nation. Jun's (2011) research on Black orientalism in the late nineteenth-century African American press foregrounds the multiple layers of contradictions in inter-minority racialization. On the one hand, orientalist tropes—the construction of the Chinese as the uncivilized heathen, the portrayal of Chinatown as a place

full of social vice and moral corruption, and the depiction of exotic Chinese customs—were used by African Americans as powerful weapons to fight against racial stereotypes of Blacks as primitive, irrational, immoral and pre-modern and thus to justify their own entitlement to modernity and American citizenship. On the other hand, Black orientalism was compromised by the Black press's unanimous denunciation of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Such literature attests to the multiplicity of racialization processes and the necessity to examine the pluralization of meanings of race and racism in different historical contexts.

### **The Racialization of Migrants in the Global South**

Scholars have used different terms to describe racism and racialization in the Global South, i.e. non-Western forms of racialization (Bonnett 2018), South-South racialization (Sautman and Yan 2016), new racism (Ang 2018) and racism with Chinese characteristics (Lan 2016). Following these pioneering works, this special issue also makes an analytical distinction between racialization in the Global North and the Global South to highlight the mediating role of specific historical and cultural contexts. Instead of reifying the North/South binary, we critically reflect on how the racialization of migrants in the Global South may reproduce, if at times in fragmented and distorted ways, the racializing discourses of the Global North. We are also interested in examining how the Covid-19 pandemic gave rise to new forms of racialization. In general, the racialization of migrants in the Global South is marked by three characteristics. First, it moves beyond the black and white binary which dominates race relations in the major western countries. Second, it often involves racialization between co-ethnic groups. Finally, with the rise of Asian economies, white migrants are increasingly being subjected to racialization in Asian societies. We review three bodies of literature related to these themes.

The recent migration of Africans to China and Chinese to Africa serves as a good example of racialization beyond the black and white binary.

While racism against black Africans in China is a highly contentious topic, some scholars have already noted limitations in applying western notions of race and racism uncritically to the Chinese context. In her research on African traders in Guangzhou, Lan (2016) argues that anti-black racism in China cannot be interpreted solely within the black and white binary. Instead, it must be situated within the larger context of the triangular power relations between China, Africa and the West. Sautman and Yan (2016) complicate anti-black racism among Chinese migrants in Africa by noting their contradictory roles as both racializers and victims of racialization. Both groups of scholars also note the importance of the indigenous Chinese concept of *suzhi* (roughly translated as quality) as a major criterion for constructing racialized differences between Chinese and Africans. The bi-directional nature of grassroots migration between China and Africa also points to a process of mutual racialization in daily interactions between Chinese and African migrants, though heavily mediated by western racial ideologies (Lan 2019; Sautman and Yan 2009). In sum, the existing literature on racialization between Chinese and African migrants examines it not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a complex process that is embedded in labour migration, state immigration policy, geopolitical tensions between China and major western countries and local election politics in Africa (Lan 2015; Sautman and Yan 2014; Yan and Sautman 2012).

Racialization between co-ethnic groups in the Global South is sometimes conceptualized as racialization without white domination or racism by Asians and among Asians (Ang 2018). However, we suggest that the absence of a white-majority population does not prevent the circulation of white-supremacist ideologies in the Global South. It is important to note that co-ethnic racialization is often not based on phenotypical differences, but on a multitude of factors such as ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, language and culture. Iwata and Nemoto (2017) find that Japanese-Brazilian migrants are racialized in

Japan as the culturally inferior racial Other based on their nationality and are treated as low-skilled workers by the Japanese state. In contrast, white migrants from western countries are regarded as culturally superior by Japanese residents and are granted work visas as highly skilled migrants by the state. Ang's (2018) research on Singapore's new Chinatown shows that the racialization of newly arrived Chinese migrants by Singaporean-Chinese both echoes colonial racism and reflects the intersection of global capitalism and Singapore's local modernity. An exceptional case is McDuie-Ra's (2015) study of racism in metropolitan India against migrants from its northeast borderland. He argues that migrants from the northeast face race-based violence in Indian cities due to their phenotypical differences and their classed and gendered positions as migrant service workers. His research also situates the debates on race in India in the larger historical context of nation-building projects and borderland politics in Southeast Asia.

The racialization of white migrants in the Global South is marked by a notable contradiction. On the one hand, whiteness continues to function as a status symbol and can easily be converted into various types of social privilege (Fechter 2005; Kunz 2020; Lan 2011; Leonard 2010; Stanley 2012). Leonard (2019) and Camenisch and Suter (2019) even suggest that whiteness can be an essential skill that different western migrants bring to China's job market. On the other hand, various scholars also note the decline of white privilege in Asian societies due to the recent rise of Asian economies (Farrer 2019; Hoang 2015). In her research on non-elite, non-managerial European professionals in Japan and Singapore, Hof (2021) draws attention to the passive nature of whiteness, that is, when whiteness is reduced to tokenism and stops bringing expected social privileges and benefits to her participants. Camenisch (2022) similarly describes the racialized 'middling' positionalities of white European migrants in China, which she finds to be characterized by racialized elevation and subjugation simultaneously, equally shaped

by the continuities of white privilege and an atmosphere of 'Chinese ascendancy'. Attending to the increased diversity and social stratification among white migrants in China, Lan (2022) examines the mutually constitutive nature of privilege and precariousness in the racialization experiences of western English teachers. She identifies a hierarchical ranking of different groups of white teachers based on their nationality and English-language proficiency in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in China. In sum, the existing literature on the racialization of white experiences in the Global South not only benefits from critical whiteness studies in the West, it also breaks new ground by identifying new sites and new norms of racialization beyond Europe and North America.

### **Pandemics and Racialization**

Historically, marginalized and racialized social groups have repeatedly been blamed for the spread of infectious diseases (Chamberlain 2020). Shah's (2001) research on race and epidemics in San Francisco's Chinatown in the nineteenth century reveals the racialization of Chinese immigrants as filthy and diseased, and as the carriers of such incurable afflictions as smallpox, syphilis and bubonic plague. He argues that the demonization of Chinese immigrants serves the purpose of upholding white, heterosexual norms in public health policy. Scholars who have studied media reports in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia during the Ebola crisis also note how racializing narratives about this virus contribute to long-standing discussions about immigration. They show that the fight against Ebola feeds into discourse about the need for intensified border controls to keep out infected, suspected and racialized bodies (Murdocca 2003; Adeyanju and Oriola 2010; Monson 2017). The Western media's racialization of Ebola as 'African', 'other' and 'scary' presents Africa as a site of disease and conflates blackness with being diseased (Monson 2017). Murdocca (2003) argues that racializing discourses about infectious diseases construct a distinction

between 'respectable' and 'degenerate' bodies that strengthens the racial fantasies that underpin ideas about Canadian nationalism.

In the case of Covid-19, although the virus originated in China, not in Africa, the dynamics that unfolded after the outbreak were similar. Media across the world produced narratives about why this virus came into existence 'there' and not 'here', focusing in particular on ideas about exotic Chinese eating habits and the significance of China's 'wet markets' (Lynteris and Fearnley 2020). Such media representations not only revive a colonial discourse of Orientalism but also reinforce biological racism, as Asian bodies are conflated with the Covid-19 virus. For example, the former US president Donald Trump repeatedly referred to Covid-19 as the 'China virus', and an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* described China as the 'real sick man of Asia' (Mead 2020). In line with Murdocca's (2003) analysis of Ebola as an African problem that Canada needed to protect itself from by insulating itself, countries around the world imposed travel bans on Chinese citizens, which were later extended to other countries where the virus had been detected. Following the production of ideas about a racialized group that carries and spreads this virus, Chinese and East Asian-looking people living in western countries reported being subjected to racist encounters (Wang et al. 2021; Yeh 2020). In the United States, a non-governmental organization called 'Stop Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) Hate' reported more than 1135 experiences of discrimination during the first two weeks of the Covid-19 outbreak (A3PCON and CAA 2020). Going beyond the context of the United States, Human Rights Watch also reports on anti-Asian violence in Europe, Africa and the Middle East, as well as the Covid-19-fuelled discrimination of Muslims in Sri Lanka, India and Myanmar and of Africans in China (Human Rights Watch 2020).

### The Special Issue

The contributors to this special issue, primarily from the social sciences, have substantial expe-

rience working with immigrant and minority groups in the Global South. Their research methodology is marked by a combination of online and offline methods, such as participant observation, online and live interviews, discourse analysis and media analysis. This special issue contributes to existing literature on pandemics and racialization, as well as to debates on South-South racialization, in three ways.

First, all papers in this Special Issue bring to the fore how pre-existing boundary-making projects with colonial roots have flourished after Covid-19. They illustrate the historical continuities of racism and racialized practices against migrants and people of colour, such as the Apartheid regime in South Africa (Musariri), colonial and Orientalist tropes in Bangladesh (Siddiqi and Ashraf) and the colonial concept of race in Africa (Vaughn et al.). Relatedly, several papers analyse narratives about 'risks'. For example, based on collaborative research in South Africa, Ghana and Kenya, Vaughn et al. discuss the emergence and spread of the black immunity myth in these three countries. This myth is a part of the Covid-19 'racialised infodemic', which refers to false information circulating about the virus and propagating ideas about how people identified as belonging to particular 'races' are either more or less at risk of contracting and spreading the Covid-19 virus. They explain that attributing the 'risk' label to persons relates back to colonial strategies that favoured the behavioural and cultural norms of the powerful over those of the marginalized. This finding resonates with the article by Siddiqi and Ashraf on the stigmatization and othering of garment factory workers in Bangladesh, whose coerced mobility led to them being identified as 'major vectors of disease, and stigmatized as reckless, selfish and wilfully endangering the lives of others' (Siddiqi and Ashraf). The role of mobility in being classified as risky is highlighted by several authors (Siddiqi and Ashraf, Vaughn et al., Musariri) but becomes especially clear in Musariri's research on xenophobia against external Black African migrant workers in South Africa during the early Covid-19 era.

Second, the intersectional analytical approach taken by these papers sheds light on the unevenness and heterogeneous nature of South-South racialization. They show how narratives of alterity are becoming more complex and are not merely based on phenotypical differences or nationality, but also involve ideas about class, mobility and risk. The Bangladeshi garment workers in Siddiqi and Ashraf's paper are othered, and even dehumanized and animalized, along racialized class lines that imagine labouring bodies as less vulnerable to disease. The migrants in South Africa in Musariri's paper are not racialized based on phenotypical differences, but placed on the intersection of class, nationality and immigration status. Moreover, this paper shows that narratives of alterity can shift as the racial discourse about 'black immunity' that was dominant in the initial phase of the pandemic changed into xenophobia aimed at people with specific nationalities who were singled out as scapegoats and economic parasites undeserving of protection and treatment against the virus.

Last but not least, the papers in this collection highlight the contradictory role of the digital media, which both helps spread racialized stereotypes and enables grassroots resistance and social activism (Denardi and Bauman, Musariri, Siddiqi and Ashraf, Vaughn et al.). Restrictions of physical movement during the Covid-19 pandemic have intensified the use of social media and the internet. This not only contributes to the blurring of the divide between online and offline worlds, it also facilitates new practices of racialized boundary-making and unmaking. The paper by Baumann and Denardi, which investigates how racism and anti-racist counter-movements of ethnic Chinese minorities developed in Argentina before and during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, illustrates this clearly. By studying Argentinian online and social media, the authors show that, in the wake of the pandemic, longstanding anti-Chinese sentiments were reactivated and merged with discriminatory discourses originating in western countries to create new forms of institutional racism. However, this

uptick in Sinophobia led to the gradual mobilization of the formerly 'silent' Chinese minority in Argentina, when ethnic Chinese youth in Argentina started to reflect on and speak out against their racialization and stigmatization.

This special issue contributes new knowledge and insights to racial formation during Covid-19 in the Global South. It pushes the readers to contemplate the pluralization of racial meanings in new historical contexts. The papers move beyond the restrictions of specific locations in the Global South and attend to the complex intersections of the global and the local. They also destabilize the binary between racializers and racialized by highlighting the materiality of race as embedded in global capitalism, local state policies aimed at containing Covid-19 and grassroots anti-racism movements (Raghuram 2022). The authors adopt a historical and transnational perspective to show the connections between old racist ideologies and practices originating in the Global North and their re-articulations in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Global South. We understand the Global South not only as a geographical region, but also as a structural conjuncture that offers the possibility to decolonize western knowledge as a universal norm against which other types of knowledge are evaluated and legitimized (J. Kim 2017). This special issue helps raise awareness of the dangers of reproducing the West versus Rest binary in theorizing South-South racialization. Moreover, it highlights the importance of acknowledging both the global circulation of white hegemony and scholarly investment in decolonizing projects that expose the limitations of Western notions of race and racism in defining newly emerged othering experiences during Covid-19 in the Global South.

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