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Staying quiet or rocking the boat? An autoethnography of organisational visual white supremacy

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reflect on critical race theory's application in organisational visuals research with a focus on forms of visual white supremacy in the workplace.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on the authors' personal experiences as racialised "Others" with organisational white supremacy, this paper employs reflective autoethnography to elucidate how whiteness is positioned in the academic workplace through the use of visual imagery. The university, departments and colleagues appearing in this study have been de-identified to ensure their anonymity and protect their privacy.

Findings – The authors' autoethnographic accounts discuss how people of colour are appropriated, commodified and subordinated in the ongoing practice of whiteness.

Research limitations/implications – Illuminating the subtle ways through which white supremacy is embedded in the visual and aesthetic dimensions of the organisation provides a more critical awareness of workplace racism.

Originality/value – This paper advances the critical project of organisational visual studies by interrogating the ways by which white dominance is enacted and reinforced via the everyday visual and aesthetic dimensions of the workplace. An added contribution of this paper is in demonstrating that visual racism extends beyond misrepresentations of people of colour, but can also manifest in what the authors conceptualise as "visual white supremacy".

Keywords Autoethnography, Critical race theory, Organization visuals, Visual white supremacy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the last decade, organisational visual research has risen in response to the growing prevalence of visual symbols and artefacts in contemporary life (Bell and Davison, 2013; Meyer *et al.*, 2013; Warren, 2008). While much of this field has stated a critical orientation towards how power is implicated in organisational visuals and aesthetics, we suggest that the field can go further in interrogating the ways in which visual dimensions of the workplace contribute to systems of racial domination (Meyer *et al.*, 2013).

In particular, we propose that organisational visual research has much to gain by drawing on the established field of critical race theory (CRT) and its articulation of

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visual racism (Abel, 2010; Dávila, 2008; Harris, 2003; Smith, 2004; Solórzano, 1997). As it follows, the aim of the paper is to advance the critical project of organisational visual studies by identifying the ways in which visual racism is produced through the embodied materiality of organisations. By drawing on our own autoethnographic materials working in Australian metropolitan universities, we further extend visual racism theory by demonstrating more subtle and insidious ways that visuals can reinforce the dominance of whiteness in organisations through what we call "visual white supremacy".

We begin by broadly outlining the existing research on organisational visuals and show how its critical developments reveal significant opportunities for cross-fertilisation with CRT and visual racism theory. Then drawing on our personal experiences, we propose visual white supremacy as one form by which racism manifests through organisational visuals. We conclude by articulating the potential for organisational visual research to challenge and transform processes of white domination.

Visualising organisations

The "omnipresence of the visual world" in contemporary societies (Baudrillard, 1994; Debord, 1995; Gaggiotti, 2012, p. 270) has stimulated wide-reaching social scientific interest in the visual symbols and artefacts that permeate our everyday lives (Bell and Davison, 2013). Although the field of organisation studies has been slower to respond to this "visual turn", significant inroads have been made in the last decade to establish visuals as both subject and method of understanding organisational life (Bell and Davison, 2013; Newton and Meyer, 2013; Warren, 2008). This interest builds on the growing awareness of the importance of organisational aesthetics and the need to understand the emotional and sensorial dimensions of organisations traditionally neglected by our field's rationalistic and instrumental focus (Bell and Davison, 2013; Gagliardi, 1990; Hancock, 2005; Höpfl and Linstead, 2000; Strati, 1992; Taylor and Hansen, 2005).

Visuals are defined broadly in the organisation literature. They can refer to two-dimensional images, from static photographs and illustrations to moving film and animations, as well as their combination such as on web pages and presentation slides (Bell and Davison, 2013; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). Although less commonly analysed, the visual dimensions of organisations also comprise three-dimensional images such as architecture, workplace layout and even the body conveyed visually through physical appearance, dress, movement and posture (Bell and Davison, 2013; Carr and Hancock, 2003; Dale and Burrell, 2008; Gagliardi, 1990; Rafaeli and Pratt, 1993; Trethewey, 1999). Visual theory has also contributed to more complex ways of seeing and understanding how seemingly static, two-dimensional images are implicated in the embodied, spatial and temporal processes of organising (Bell and Davison, 2013), for example, how workers experience signs and posters positioned in their workplace (Warren, 2002). As such, organisational visuals tend to follow the tradition of social semiotics that recognise the interlinked and intertextual nature of the visual and verbal (Meyer *et al.*, 2013). Neither can be fully understood in isolation; but rather, meaning is made through their interaction (Meyer *et al.*, 2013).

Empirical research of visuals draws on diverse methodological approaches. In anthropologically inspired research, researchers generate their own images as they document the visual dimensions of organisational life (Gaggiotti, 2012; Pink, 2001). Visuals are widely used by anthropologists to position the multi-ethnic environments forming ethnographic fieldsites, making the invisible objects and subjects visible, and by doing so, challenging the assumptions made about race, difference and Otherness (Prato, 2009). Other approaches grounded in semiotics and discourse analysis are

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more concerned with interpreting the social meanings of pre-existing visual artefacts (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Liu *et al.*, 2015; Liu and Baker, 2016; Rose, 2007). In recent years, the use of photo-elicitation techniques has advanced the analysis of participant-generated images, which allow participants greater control over the selection and framing of the visuals that represent their aesthetic experiences (Warren, 2005, 2008). Reflecting on the ethics behind the visual representations of the Other and Otherness, anthropologists are also shifting towards more reciprocal forms of engagement between the researchers and the researched (MacDougall, 1997).

In its oppositional stance to the masculinist articulation of Weberian rational bureaucracy (Bologh, 1990), organisational visuals have often claimed to bring a critical perspective to mainstream organisation studies and take an interest in their emancipatory potential (Taylor and Hansen, 2005). With respect to media representations, for example, Hardy and Phillips (1999) investigated how cartoons of refugees in the Canadian media drew on societal discourses to varyingly depict refugees as frauds, victims or both. More recently, the coverage of Hurricane Katrina in the US portrayed black Americans as "looters" and instigators behind violence and disorder as opposed to white residents of the affected area who appeared on photographs described as "searching for food" (Sonnett *et al.*, 2015). In light of the recent incidents of interracial violence, much work has been done to demonstrate how black Americans are portrayed as criminals and rioters (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015).

Bringing visual analyses even closer to the embodied materiality of the workplace, Sam Warren's (2002, 2008) work has been critical in demonstrating the value of using participant-generated photographs to articulate aesthetic experiences of work. Warren (2002) provided cameras to her participants working in the web design department of an information technology firm and had them photograph and later describe their experiences working in their organisational environment. This approach enabled Warren (2002) to combine photographic and verbal data to convey the sensorial imagery of their aesthetic experience in its embodied, spatial and temporal context.

While these literatures have expressed a broad awareness of how power dynamics mediate the visual representation of subjects and subjectivity (Meyer *et al.*, 2013), few studies are explicit about interrogating the ways in which visual forms contribute to racial domination. In contrast, the CRT field has developed insightful visual analyses that attend to identifying and transforming processes of racialisation and racism (Abel, 2010; Harris, 2003; Pérez Huber and Solórzano, 2015; Smith, 2004; Solórzano, 1997). We suggest that organisational visuals could usefully engage with critical race theorising to deepen our understanding of how aesthetic experiences of racism may be produced in the workplace and thereby further the critical project of our disciplines (Warren, 2005).

Visualising racism

CRT was developed in the USA in the 1970s among legal activists and scholars of colour who sought to refocus society on race relations at a time when Civil Rights progress appeared to have stalled (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Now working across a broad band of disciplines including sociology, education, communication and media studies, and film and literature studies, critical race theorists continue to advance research that highlights the racial oppression faced by people of colour, while providing them and their white allies with the tools to dismantle white supremacy (Bell, 1989; Chou and Choi, 2013). Within the CRT field, white supremacy refers to the centuries-old racialised social system comprising the "totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 9).

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White supremacy is systemic and operates in and through everyday racism to maintain a strong positive orientation to "white superiority, virtue, moral goodness, and action" (Deitch *et al.*, 2003; Essed, 1991; Feagin, 2013, p. 10; Hill, 2009; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014).

Core to CRT is the belief that race is not a fixed biological marker, but socially constructed and politically contested (Omi and Winant, 1994). Whiteness is therefore not a trait essentialised in white people, but as Frankenberg (1993) argues, is a set of interlinked dimensions. Specifically, whiteness is simultaneously a location of racial privilege; a standpoint from which white people look at themselves, at others and at society; and a collection of taken-for-granted social practices (Essed, 1991; Frankenberg, 1993; Hill, 2009; Sullivan, 2006, 2014). The ongoing practice of whiteness is thus what reinforces white supremacy.

These practices of white supremacy are not always dramatic, overt events, but include pervasive, mundane processes such as everyday communication (Essed, 1991; Hill, 2009). In her study of white racist language, Hill (2009) delineates the ways in which white supremacy is embedded in the use of racial slurs and epithets, as well as more covert discourses such as linguistic mockery and appropriation. Non-verbal signals, such as when people exhibit nervousness around black people (Feagin, 2013), also contribute to everyday "microaggressions" experienced by people of colour (Pierce, 1974). Microaggressions serve to reinforce the marginalisation and subordination of people of colour, while taking a physical and psychological toll on them (Deitch *et al.*, 2003; Pérez Huber and Solórzano, 2015).

Critical race theorists have also canvassed the multitude ways white supremacy is communicated visually (Abel, 2010; Dávila, 2008; Harris, 2003; Smith, 2004; Solórzano, 1997). Like the organisational visuals research, visual racism has predominantly focused on harmful stereotypical (mis)representations, but tends to engage more explicitly with interrogating whiteness in its visual forms. For example, Vats and Nishime (2013) meticulously deconstruct Karl Lagerfeld's filmic homage to Coco Chanel, *Paris-Shanghai: A Fantasy*, and detail how visual racism, including the use of yellowface, inscribe Orientalist fantasies of China that limit the subjectivity of the racial Other and consolidates whiteness. Analysing *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*, Yosso and García (2010) reveal how Hollywood films perpetuate stereotypical images of Latinas/os as *cholos* and hot tempered harlots, constructing them as a problem requiring "white saviours" to fix.

Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015) extend the theory of racial microaggressions by showing how they can be visually conveyed. They propose "visual microaggressions" as the systemic, everyday visual assaults based on race, gender, class, language, immigration status and other markers of identity that emerge in various mediums in everyday life (Pérez Huber and Solórzano, 2015, p. 223). To illustrate how visual microaggressions manifest, they draw specifically on the "Mexican bandit" image as depicted in print advertisements and enacted through university campus events to demonstrate how the visual representations of Latinas/os as criminal, non-native and a threat function to reinforce institutionalised racism and perpetuate white supremacist ideologies (Pérez Huber and Solórzano, 2015).

In this paper, we explore visuals at the intersection of organisation studies and CRT literatures in order to theorise a form of "organisational visual racism". Where both literatures have predominantly explored visuals critically via the misrepresentations of social groups (Hardy and Phillips, 1999; Meyer *et al.*, 2013; Pérez Huber and Solórzano, 2015; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005; Vats and Nishime, 2013; Yosso and García, 2010), we seek to extend visual racism theory by suggesting another form of visual racism – visual white supremacy – that enacts and reinforces the dominance of whiteness in post-colonial nations such as Australia.

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Using autoethnography

Coming from different disciplinary backgrounds – the first author from organisation studies and the second author from cultural anthropology – we located CRT as our common ground due to its cross-disciplinary possibilities and the specific position it empowered us to take. The interdisciplinary nature of autoethnographic inquiry allowed us to draw on our personal experiences with racialised visuals in the academic workplace. By analysing those representations, we arrived at informed conclusions from our own positions as Others.

By Others we understand those – us – who are constructed by the members of the dominant societal group as "exotic", people of colour, foreigners, migrants and non-Westerners (Staszak, 2008). As Others, we are not likely to be aligned with the dominant white culture associated with our workplace and do not quite belong in/with (in) its mainstream narratives. Because of our precarious positioning, we may often find ourselves facing a dilemma whether to speak up ("rock the boat") against the normalised racist practices we witness in our workplace, or to stay quiet, and thus maintain the status quo while reinforcing the injustices we have witnessed.

The process of co-creating a shared autoethnographic narrative demanded from us to be self-reflexive but not self-indulgent. To enhance the former and avoid the latter, we checked and re-confirmed (or challenged) each other's personal accounts of the same events before arriving at shared understandings. Henceforth, we use autoethnographic writing as a way to disrupt the accepted racial norms in the academic workplace, to flip the positioning of power, and to redefine and redraw borderlines of what is acceptable and what is not (or, at least, should not be) when it comes to the un/official visual symbols and artefacts of the workplace. In particular, our goal is to shift the power away from the mainstream white "centre" by writing about those defined as the Other – those who are marginalised, treated tokenistically and reduced to the label of "exotic" through the visual and aesthetic dimensions of the workplace.

In the 1970s when the term "autoethnography" began to emerge (Hayano, 1979; Heider, 1975), it was limited to describing researchers' status as insiders focusing on the study of their "own people" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The idea of ethnography as a standpoint research used to challenge the norms of the mainstream academia did not appear until later when women, people of colour and other non-dominant types of researchers started entering the academia and offering alternatives to mainstream views (Ellis *et al.*, 2011).

The concept of autoethnography as a valid way of collecting empirical data was and still is contested; the persisting trend being to push autoethnography to the periphery of the academic mainstream, and position autoethnographic narratives as non-traditional, abnormal, even "delinquent" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). However, autoethnography is essential to rigorous academic practice: the elements of it can be found in the seminal academic scholarship of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), Foucault's reflexivity (Rabinow, 1984), standpoint theory (Harding, 2004; Trinh, 1989; Anzaldúa, 1987) and the insider/outsider self-positioning work expected from scholars working, for instance, on Indigenous topics of inquiry (Pechenkina, 2014). Bakhtin (1981) emphasised the importance of a broader interpretive space in scholarship: the space which encouraged "multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, plural voices and local and illegitimate knowledges" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 735) and contravened mainstream knowledge and theory. Standpoint theorists (Trinh, 1989; Anzaldúa, 1987) further advocated for narratives which reveal how gender, race, class, sexuality and ethnicity are positioned in and affected by the context of everyday lived experiences.

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Autoethnography, being a process as well as a product of research, approaches scholarly endeavour as a political and socially conscious act (Adams and Holman Jones, 2008), and can even be positioned as an act of transformational resistance (Chew and Keliiaa, 2015; Hernandez, 2013). What sets autoethnographic accounts apart from the majority of mainstream academic work is that autoethnographies allow for researchers/authors to become characters in their own academic stories (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). When creating an autoethnographic narrative, researchers have a variety of ways to accumulate rich data: they can analyse their lived experiences in hindsight, and examine "epiphanies", which are self-claimed phenomena (meaning they can be transformative for one person but not necessarily for another) that created long-lasting effects and memories as a result of an experienced "intense" situation (Bruner, 1993; Denzin, 1989; Freeman, 2004). As part of their research activities, autoethnographers can also interpret a variety of visuals, including photographs or collages (Delany, 2004; Sobers, 2014). The latter is something that is at the core of our work here: we will dwell into the autoethnographic specifics of our encounters with racist visuals in the workplace in the section entitled "Vignettes".

As a method, autoethnography's goal is to generate rich data, which can include descriptions of the physical settings in which the phenomenon occurred, the researchers' emotive responses to it, and the thoughts it generated – something Ellis (1999) defines as systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall, both utilised to understand the lived experience. We are in agreement with Styhre and Tienari (2014, p. 445), however, that self-reflexivity at the core of autoethnography is "interpersonal rather than personal" and that it is a difficult task to accomplish the fit of being fully self-reflexive alone, and rather self-reflexivity should be "done together with others and […] in a given context" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 447).

Good honest autoethnographies are not easy. Full of doubts and emotional pain and discomfort, autobiographical writing has multiple layers and constantly makes connections between the personal and the cultural and the everyday lived experience (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The autoethnographic gaze can be defined as constantly backward and forward, inward and outward, going between the wider ethnographical lens, then becoming narrower to account for the personal lived experience and then further inward to the "vulnerable" self (Kondo, 1990; Deck, 1990; Reed-Danahay, 1997).

Having positioned our methodological frameworks, we come to define our own standpoints and then describe how we have collected our autoethnographic data and the process we followed to co-analyse it.

Our standpoints

I, the first author, immigrated to Australia at the age of five with my parents when the Labor Government in Australia lifted immigration restrictions for Chinese students following the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. Growing up in the densely immigrant-populated inner west of Sydney, I held to the belief that racism no longer existed in "multicultural" Australia, a belief I obstinately declared throughout my adolescence. It was not until university when I began to be confronted with the processes of racialisation to an extent I could no longer ignore. Student hostility towards (predominantly Asian) international students seemed palpable. In my first week, I saw the corridors of our campus buildings plastered with Student Council election posters imploring, "Are you sick of seeing international students driving around campus with their BMWs? Vote for us and we promise to boost places for local students!" Although I was a local student, these posters picked at the scars that

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reminded me of my difference under a virulent white gaze. The posters ironically decried the economic "privilege" of international students and served to reinstate the institution and the society as the deserving claim of white people.

I, the second author, date my first memories of being positioned as Other to growing up in my native Russia where my "non-Slavic" appearance used to provoke questions from my "more" Slavic peers as to my "real" ethnic background – as if I was hiding it behind my Slavic name and surname. Outside of Russia, I got labelled as a distinctive Other while on student exchange in the USA where my Otherness was accentuated by my accent and enhanced by the remnants of the Cold War memories in the collective psyche of my host nation fuelled by the portrayal of Soviet spies in American movies. By the time I migrated to Australia in 2006, I was no stranger to the intricacies of race relations, but, oddly, I found that in Australia I could mostly "pass" for white. This "passing" only worked until I opened my mouth. My accent would create confusion, affecting the way I was perceived, and I would be then "tested" for my whiteness. Am I white or the Other? If white, how white? My views and attitudes would be solicited in a conversation and, perhaps, a racist joke would be uttered and my reaction to it observed. While I could speak up when subjected to such verbal acts of white supremacy, how could I show my disapproval of white supremacy visual displays I witnessed in my academic workplace? After all, when it comes to visual representation, there is not always a direct opportunity for verbal engagement with the person responsible for such displays – which are mostly anonymous and, as we describe in this paper's Vignettes section, provoke feelings of discomfort and anger while rendering us voiceless.

By bringing together our experiences with white visual supremacies and by interpersonally (co-)analysing four distinctive cases of visuals deployed by white colleagues and management to marginalise and exploit Otherness, in this paper we utilise CRT to challenge white visual supremacy and invert its power. Coming from our positions of "difference", we self-reflect on our encounters of marginalisation and exploitation of Otherness in the workplace to benefit white colleagues. We query how visual displays in the workplace reveal these power dynamics between the dominant group and the Others.

Fieldwork

We realised at our first meeting we had shared research interests in race. The idea for our autoethnographic fieldwork emerged when we first encountered the workplace collage that will be introduced later in "The Help" vignette, after which the in-depth work of collecting and (co-)analysing further data had begun.

During the six months of conducting autoethnographic observations in our respective work environments, we identified three more incidents in addition to the collage where the visual and aesthetic dimensions of our workplace – in our view – reinforced white supremacy. We both took field jottings at first, later transforming those into thick-description fieldnotes which served as the basis of our (co-)analysis and eventually became the "Vignettes".

As we were observing and writing down our emotive responses and initial interpretations of the events taking place, we began to meet on a regular basis to conduct interpersonal interviews based on our introspections and emotional recall (Ellis, 1999). The interpersonal component of our method allowed us to query our experiences acting and reacting in response to the four instances of visual white supremacy described in this paper. Therefore, our interpersonal reflection was driven

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by our epiphanies recollected individually, written down in hindsight and then discussed between the two of us, queried, challenged, checked and rechecked. We have, in the end, arrived at a shared understanding in regards to our interpretations of the events described in the Vignettes.

Our use of autoethnographic vignettes was inspired by scholars like Denzin (2000, p. 905) who advocates for the use of vignettes to allow readers to "relive the experience through the [researcher's] eyes" and to "elicit [their] emotional identification" (Denzin, 1989, p. 124) with the researchers/authors/performers involved in the events behind the vignettes. Like Humphreys (2005, p. 842) who views vignettes as a way to "connect […] both as a writer and subject with the reader via an autobiographical account", we use vignettes to position ourselves in an accessible way within specific contexts.

As a result of our interpersonal autoethnographic fieldwork process, we created our intertwined rich personal narratives (Freeman, 1998) by reflecting on the same events from differing perspectives. Already implying a high level of self-reflexivity, our autoethnographic approach was therefore strengthened by also being interpersonal (Styhre and Tienari, 2014) as we served as checkers of one another's "version" of truth.

Setting

The university which became a setting for our co-constructed autoethnography is a mid-size higher education institution located in one of Australia's largest cities. With the total number of staff employed across the university reaching approximately 2,000 in 2014 (Department of Education, 2004/2014), data on gender distribution is the only diversity indicator used to analyse the university's staff composition. As the most current data are only available for ongoing or fixed-term staff, casual staff statistics represent another unknown category for us to determine the diversity among staff. While there is a gender balance between male and female staff employed in academic or professional (non-academic) roles across the university, male academics outnumber women academics almost two to one. In regards to qualifications of staff, male academics are more likely to have a postgraduate research or coursework degree, with this disparity being most significant among academic staff with a doctorate. In regards to the academic scale, women are more likely to be employed at lower levels, while men are overrepresented in Levels C and above. Measured by another indicator of staff diversity – the indigeneity factor – the university employed less than ten Indigenous staff members in 2013.

Whilst limited, information on university student cohort composition available via the Department of Education (2004/2014) indicates that international students comprise one quarter of all students. However, since New Zealand and non-specified "other" categories were also included in the domestic student cohort, the domestic category includes non-white Australian citizens. With regards to gender, almost twice as many male international students than female students studied at the university in 2014; and out of approximately 40 Indigenous students enroled at university in 2014, females were the significant majority. Without students' ethno-racial identifications openly reported, however, we can only speculate the meanings behind these statistics with regards to the diversity of the university student body.

Unlike with the mandatory annual reporting of student numbers, Australian universities are not required to report on the ethnic diversity of their staff. Information like nationality, country of origin and language of staff, while requested from the prospective staff at the time an application for employment is made, is not publicly available. Our request for aggregated statistical data of this sort from the

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university's human resources department was declined. The diverse composition of the university staff, therefore, can only be guessed at, based on visual representation and informal knowledge.

Vignettes

The Photographer

It is a departmental planning meeting with faculty and administrators led by the recently appointed white Australian male Dean. The space chosen to host this event is a small local café where we are to stay all day to work through the many strategic items pertinent to our department and discuss the work that needs to be done in the coming year. We have been through many managerial and structural changes in the recent past and this planning meeting is to clarify any uncertainties we might have. The department's composition is gender-balanced and dominated by a large Anglo-Australian cohort. I, the second author, am one of a small group of non-Australian born employees and am one of three employees (all of us women) who are visually non-white.

As we enter the meeting space, we are directed to form tables with colleagues from other teams – to avoid sitting with our immediate team members. Once everyone is seated, the new Dean's PowerPoint presentation begins. We are bombarded with the photographs of "exotic" people, alternating between those of South-East Asian and African backgrounds. Regardless of gender, these "exotic" Others are all dressed in traditional ethnic clothes – colourful saris, head-to-toe robes and wraps, some naked skin exposed glistening in the sun. More often than that, the faces of these Others are painted or their skin tattooed in a certain way to indicate their cultural or ethnic belonging. Running as background to the Dean's presentation, these images have no relation to the presentation's content but are rather included, as I come to understand, to showcase the speaker's photography skills and "worldliness". Later I discover that the Dean makes a common practice of such use of his photographs of the "exotic" Others in various workplace contexts. It becomes clear to me that the issue around exploiting these images of the non-Western Others to make presentations "more engaging" and "interesting" has probably never even crossed the speaker's mind. Having no opportunity to discuss my reaction to the presentation at the meeting, I choose not to bring up my discomfort with Others.

The Portrait

The lecture theatre quickly fills up with over a hundred colleagues as I, the first author, sit waiting for the first faculty meeting in my new academic role to begin. The energy in the room is electric as people swap stories about their summer holidays, but we all fix our attention to the Dean as soon as the formal proceedings begin. After he delivers a report on faculty activities, the Dean introduces us to a newly appointed senior administrator. She sweeps on stage amidst resounding applause and begins to demonstrate a new technological feature of our staff intranet on the projection screen: a web page that will function as a comprehensive index for all faculty policies and procedures.

She proceeds to illustrate how all the administrative staff have their contact details listed on the website by navigating to her own profile page. A photograph of her appears. She looks very pretty; her head is cocked to the side, framed by a glossy blonde fringe, and her eyes half-closed in a smile. "Ugh!" she exclaims, as the

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photograph loads. "I look terrible in that photo […] I look Chinese!" A tense hush falls over the crowd, but no one speaks out. "I must have heard wrong", I think to myself. "How could a blonde white woman think she looks Chinese? What does she think Chinese people look like, if not dark hair and eyes?"

My doubt is erased the next day when the senior administrator sends an e-mail to all staff apologising for her comment with a vague statement that "causing offence on the basis of race or national or ethnic origins is unacceptable". A few colleagues who missed the faculty meeting write to me to ask what she had said. In recounting her comment a few times, it slowly dawns on me that she was referring to her eyes. My colleagues express their aghast to me, but it seems they are more amused than offended. An odd sense of embarrassment creeps up on me when I realise I had forgotten playground teasing where white children would pull apart the outside corners of their eyes to mock "squinty Asian eyes".

A week passes and I find myself walking down a deserted corridor towards the senior administrator. I decide to offer her a gentle smile to show her that I appreciate her apology, and perhaps also as a resistive act of generosity. I want to convey that we, the Others, are capable of inclusion in the face of our subordination. When our eyes meet, she looks away guiltily and seems to march away at double speed.

The Help

One morning I, the second author, walk up to my Department's shared coffee station to be greeted by a printed-out collage pinned to the noticeboard. The collage displays a line-up of maids standing at-the-ready, all impeccably dressed in black dresses and crisp white aprons (see Plate 1). The maids' faces are replaced by those of my colleagues – most of these "new" faces distinctively white. As I stare at this peculiar "office artwork", my first thoughts ("this isn't right", "this is making me uncomfortable") are soon complemented by a sense of vague recognition: I have seen this before.

At this point, my colleagues begin to arrive, some joining me by the coffee station as we wait for the kettle to boil. Not wanting to appear openly confrontational I bring up my concern with the collage in a number of limited conversations. After a few such social interactions with colleagues, I conclude that no one else has the same visceral reaction to the collage as I do. I am on my own.

As I probe into to the origins and the purposes of the artwork, the facts emerge. I learn who made the collage and why: the still from the film "The Help" was used to visualise an in-joke shared by a particular team in the office – the joke alluding to their

Plate 1.
"The Help" collage close-up and on the staff noticeboard

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"usefulness": "because we are like the maids from The Help. Get it?" When I bring up the loaded racial implications of replacing black faces with the white ones and the obvious issues with using the image from a movie about black struggles for Civil Rights to illustrate an office joke, my words are met with blank stares, tight smiles and nervous giggles. Confused (and angry), I retreat to my desk and get on with my day, but the experience lingers.

Later, I discretely complain to the office manager about the racist imagery of the collage, but my complaint is perceived as a quirky joke (perhaps I lack courage to "rock the boat" by pushing it further) and the collage remains on the noticeboard. I take a photograph of the collage to preserve it as "evidence" as I consider making my complaint official, but I never go as far as to lodge a complaint to the human resources because I am on a fixed-term contract which is shortly up for renewal. So I stay silent, choosing not to "rock the boat". The collage stays on the noticeboard.

The Campaign

Shortly after we first submitted the manuscript of this paper, the university where this study was based launched a new brand and marketing campaign. In addition to print, web and television advertisements, the main campus of the university was transformed overnight with a series of flags displayed along the most populous walkways of the campus. These sets comprised a pair of one metre long double-sided posters hung on three metre tall poles. A total of 15 sets covered the small campus, 13 of those showcasing a photograph of an academic staff alongside an inspirational quote about education and professional careers, while the remaining two sets displayed the new motto.

I, the first author, turned a corner at the end of a laneway and walked up to my office building as I normally do every morning. This morning, I was greeted by the familiar face of a colleague in my faculty. In the poster, she is cropped from the chest up with wind blowing back her hair to focus my gaze on her bright pink lipstick set against her dewy pale skin. During lunch, I left my office to meet a colleague at a café on the other side of campus and took the main pathway that crosses the campus with a meandering stone path flanked by perfectly manicured gardens. As I made this picturesque journey, admiring the new posters that were gently spaced every ten metres or so, I started to realise that all the featured staff – three men and three women – were all white.

As part of the relaunched brand of the university, the campaign served as an important visual symbol of its character and aspirations. A common discussion among academic staff in my faculty in the last year had been that our university was confused about "who we are" and the university itself acknowledged this limitation by conducting a corporate identity exercise in order to develop its brand. My walk through the campus on that day vividly conveyed to me "who" the university was. The university was white.

Discussion

In conceptualising "organisational visual white supremacy" through this paper, we have brought together the previously disconnected organisational visuals and CRT literatures. To extend the critical agenda of organisational visual research, we identified how visuals suffusing the everyday embodied materiality of organisations normalised the marginalisation of people of colour and reinforced the dominance of whiteness. Positioned as Others, when interacting with white visual supremacy at work, we at times felt like imposters in the dominant white spaces.

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"The Photographer" vignette saw the ongoing commodification of the exoticised, ethnic Other in white touristic imaginations (Korpela, 2010). Photographs representing ethno-cultural "difference" were exhibited as something the white male Dean has collected through his travels and now serve as visual artefacts of his "worldliness" and cultural capital. The individual photographs themselves showing stereotypical depictions of people of colour as smiling natives and "noble savages" contain them to their ethno-cultural "novelty" within the white norm (Swan, 2010). However, as the vignette demonstrated, visual racism rarely operates as isolated two-dimensional images, but permeate the three-dimensional embodied materiality of organisations (Bell and Davison, 2013; Warren, 2002). In effect, both the breadth and volume of the Dean's photographic collection of ethnic Others in the second vignette are operationalised in the workplace by the Dean to enhance his image as a "worldly" man.

The Photographer vignette demonstrates the inherent privilege in the normalised status of whiteness (Frankenberg, 1993). The seeming "racelessness" of white people, as in the case of the Dean, allows him to more readily exploit Otherness for his own aggrandisement and present his view of "exotic" Others through the lens of a Western "explorer" (Steinert Borella, 2009). Watching the Dean's presentation – one "exotic" stranger coming into view after another – reminded us of the colonial nature of white supremacy, where the dominance of the white gaze served to reduce and dehumanise the nameless Other located in faraway lands (Chou, 2012; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014).

Another mechanism of white privilege at work could be observed in the discourse in "The Portrait" vignette which further highlighted the dynamic and embodied nature of organisational visual white supremacy. The projected portrait of the white female administrator was not itself an exercise of racial oppression, but her racialised verbal evaluation of her attractiveness in the portrait demonstrated how visuals become implicated in the subordination of Asian people within the multi-dimensional context of the faculty meeting.

The similarity with the dynamics described in The Photographer vignette lies primarily in the process of exploitation of Otherness. In the case of The Portrait, the administrator compares her own features with a stereotypical characterisation of Asian eyes. By referring to her own features as "terrible", her shallow modesty conjures up her own hegemonic white womanhood (Pyke and Johnson, 2003), while reproducing the very "white racial frame" which shapes how we view others and ourselves within the dominant framework of white racial ideology (Chou, 2012, p. 138).

In "The Help" vignette, a still from a film about black subordination during the US Civil Rights era was appropriated by white Australians to make light of their own jobs. The dehumanisation of black women captured in the scene with the row of women standing in matching black and white uniforms, hair cut short or pulled back, was obliviously reproduced through the way the collage's creator pasted his own and other colleagues' faces over the characters. The black women's bodies thus served only as blank slates that emblematise oppression; an oppression that is depoliticised through its frivolous transposition into white middle-class work.

The articulated intentions behind our white colleague's creation of the collage may at first suggest their actions were driven by a sense of solidarity with the faceless maids depicted in the film still. However, the problematic and contested nature of the visual impact of the collage and the surrounding discourse indicate the collage was one of those practices Bonilla-Silva (2006) identified as reinforcing white privilege. Taken out of its complex socio-historical context, de-faced and digitally manipulated, the purposes of the picture of the maids became to further the white collar positioning of

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the employees, to serve as a visual artefact suggesting the employees' hard (but unappreciated) work, and to amuse the employees in its capacity as an office in-joke. Would The Help collage cause the same visceral reactions from the authors of this paper if the maids in the picture were white? Perhaps not, though more likely the image would still cause a concern in terms of its exploitation of other types of inequality, such as those perpetuated via the systems of class and gender.

"The Campaign" vignette further demonstrated the normalised character of whiteness (Dyer, 1997; Levine-Rasky, 2013) at the university on a larger scale. The proliferation of the flags on the university's main campus have made it impossible to navigate through the embodied materiality of the workplace without constant visual reminders that whiteness reigns supreme, and staff of colour at the university are unseen and unimportant. The seemingly deliberate choice of three men and three women suggested a superficial "body count" approach to gender diversity (Guerrier and Wilson, 2011; Sinclair, 2006) at the university. This balance between men and women created for the purpose of representation distorted the underrepresentation of women in academic and managerial roles at the university. Yet even in its superficiality, the marketing campaign failed to consider the lack of racial diversity represented.

Sullivan (2006) names solipsism as a practice of whiteness, which refers to a way of living as though only white people exist or matter. Although the literal existence of people of colour is acknowledged, white solipsism only considers white values, interests and needs as important (Sullivan, 2006). This practice often results in the inability of white people to form relationships with people of colour and underpins their abdication of responsibility for their effects on subdominant groups (Levine-Rasky, 2013). The white-washing of the university's branding exercise exemplified the practice of solipsism, where the presence of non-white staff and students are rendered inconsequential.

Taken together, the vignettes illustrated how visual forms can enact and reinforce the dominance of whiteness through the embodied materiality of organisations and highlighted broader considerations of how organisational visuals can be created, exhibited and framed by white people for their own benefit. Where existing studies of visual racism have focused on the stereotypical misrepresentations of people of colour and other subdominant groups (Hardy and Phillips, 1999; Meyer *et al.*, 2013; Pérez Huber and Solórzano, 2015; Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005; Vats and Nishime, 2013; Yosso and García, 2010), our examples showed how visuals can also accompany other forms of narration to marginalise people of colour. Each example functions as racial microaggressions (Pérez Huber and Solórzano, 2015) that feature in the mundane visual and aesthetic dimensions of the workplace (the staff coffee station, department and faculty meetings, the campus grounds) and perpetuates the dominant role of whiteness in defining people of colour and determining the terms of inclusion and exclusion in organisations.

Conclusion

Looking into the future of organisational visuals and CRT scholarship, our conceptualisation of organisational visual white supremacy offers an important lens to investigate the complexities of racialised visuals in the workplaces and the surrounding discourses. The empirical applications of organisational visual white supremacy can be found across a range of organisation initiatives, from diversity training to corporate marketing and branding exercises. We suggest that future research could extend on our findings by comprehensively delineating the most prevalent ways through which visual white supremacy manifest in organisations.

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The production of visual white supremacy among organisational leaders (as in "The Photographer" and "The Portrait" vignettes) also points to the powerful ways by which leadership is implicated in whiteness. The potential for leaders to reinforce and subvert organisational visual white supremacy may be usefully explored through future research. This paper highlighted our own visceral responses to organisational visual white supremacy. We suggest it would be important for future research to investigate how people of colour in organisations experience, or perhaps even resist, their own encounters with images of white supremacy.

More broadly, further in-depth explorations of workplace visuals, artefacts and iconography can be extended to add gender, sexuality and class dimensions to that of race; thus contributing to the agenda of intersectionalities scholarship. Media studies, incorporating research into visual representations of Others in digital spaces such as internet and social media (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015; Hardy and Phillips, 1999; Sonnett *et al.*, 2015) present another interdisciplinary extension of the research presented in this paper where the workplace exploitation and appropriation of visual imagery of Others are maintained via online channels.

With the growing heterogeneity of academic workplaces, it is no longer possible for organisational leaders to remain oblivious to the long-ranging negative effects of institutionalised practices that render Otherness invisible and unimportant. The societal, economic and cultural costs of racism are boosted by perpetuating financial stratification and inequality; adversely affecting health outcomes and maintaining disparity across many spheres, including education, wellbeing and employment (Brooks, 2015; Priest *et al.*, 2011, 2013). Hence, our contribution to the process of challenging the workplace racism and its many modes of expression is through not staying quiet but finding the courage to rock the boat, to subvert the meaning of the "approved" kind of diversity – the kind that stays quiet while letting the dominant whiteness shape and mould it to its advantage and likeness – and to move away from the idealised picture of "happy" (and quiet) diversity (Ahmed and Swan, 2006; Swan, 2010) towards one that speaks back.

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