

Food for thought: decolonial dining and dreaming as anti-racist praxis

Abstract

Can an art practice using porcelain shed light on colonial histories of white oppression and encourage constructive dialogue about the ongoing role of ideological whiteness in racial injustice? As a precious white commodity so entangled with the material culture of European empires, porcelain is perhaps an apt tool with which to facilitate discussions of whiteness as a focus for liberatory anti-racism. In collaboration with participants at workshops and ‘happenings’, I employ a deliberately decolonial methodology to ‘imagine otherwise’ (Sharpe 2016; Olufemi, 2021) as a praxis of resistance, to envision ‘the marvelous’¹ of a socially just future. These occasions encourage a witnessing of plural perspectives – listening, hearing, holding and embodying others’ voices, experiences and feelings. This presentation focuses on one such event, a Decolonial Dreaming Dinner, and questions whether creating such a space allows us to begin to digest the unpalatable realities of white oppression sufficiently to imagine material and structural change. The work centres communion and futurity, inspired by Fred Moten’s concept (after Denise Ferreira da Silva) of the condition in which we live being one of “difference without separability” (Moten 2014) – dreaming and dining in the service of resistance and liberation.

Key words: anti-racism, anti-racist praxis, communion, decoloniality, liberation, resistance, porcelain, whiteness

For a maker, porcelain is a notoriously difficult material to work with. My research asks whether these specific properties – its fractiousness and vulnerability when raw, its strength, pure whiteness and delicate translucency when fired – can be exploited in contemporary artwork to challenge ideas about ideological whiteness. I argue that these characteristics are both material and symbolic; porcelain objects embody and project them. High-value, sought-after porcelainware traded and exchanged during Europe’s imperial expansion were capable of communicating ideas of whiteness as power. Once European East India companies, particularly the Dutch and British, began

¹ Suzanne Césaire’s call to “be in permanent readiness for The Marvelous” is a key inspiration of the Afrosurrealist aesthetic movement, see Miller (2016)
<https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2016/10/afrosurreal-the-marvelous-and-the-invisible/>

trading with India and China, blue and white porcelain porcelain exported from China began to appear in Europe. This, as well as other types of fine porcelain, became incredibly popular and was collected obsessively by royalty and aristocracy in 17-18th century Europe. Only the most wealthy could afford to buy it at this time when just China, Japan and Korea produced it. This desire for porcelain was partly driven by the burgeoning fashion for drinking tea, coffee and chocolate in late 17th century Europe, so the demand for suitable crockery – lightweight, heat-retaining and non-porous – also grew; porcelain provided the perfect vessel for these new drinks. Coffee and chocolate were often produced by enslaved labour, but all three drinks required the addition of sugar – the lucrative crop that fuelled the transatlantic slave trade more than any other. Enslaved labour in British colonies in the Caribbean and South America produced both the sugar and the wealth necessary to buy the porcelain. Plantation owners sunk their sugar spoils into ostentatious displays of porcelain; it was a way of saying they had joined the ranks of the super-rich. Merchants of the East India company also became hugely wealthy by exploiting Indian resources and used this plunder to buy fine ‘china’. Porcelain is a commodity embroiled with the brutality of imperial and colonial extraction.

I use porcelain to interrogate the ongoing legacy of oppressive whiteness born of European empire building. I refer to whiteness, not as a skin colour, but as a false and socially constructed racialised consciousness that informs the practice of white superiority through everyday beliefs, emotions, thoughts, choices, behaviours and actions. This work has to be about liberation, collectively working for a world – to use Paulo Freire’s words – that is less ugly, more beautiful, less discriminatory, more democratic, less dehumanising and more humane, for us all (Freire, 2005, p.25). The decolonial approach I take is informed by Lydia Ayame Hiraide’s focus on the ‘de’ of decolonial (as opposed to post-colonial or anti-colonial), which positions it as a strategy “more obviously continuous and reiterative” that “not only opposes domination, but actively opens up the space of resistance of radical alterity” (Hiraide, 2021). This praxis of decoloniality entails ‘imagining otherwise’ (Sharpe 2016; Olufemi, 2021) as a strategy of struggle, to envision and build a socially just future free from white supremacy. Through my research I aim to develop a consciousness regarding whiteness that is suitably critical.

Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò describes the ‘elite capture’ that can derail well-intentioned knowledge creation between unequally positioned groups as a form of whiteness, and that its opposite is critical consciousness (Táíwò, 2022). To ensure the liberatory potential of this project, which aims to counter racism and combat the notion of ‘race’ and the resilience of racial essentialising, I use my practice to test how whiteness can be explored without it further enacting whiteness. The pitfall to avoid is giving it racial credence by referring to ‘white’ people as a distinct racial category when ‘race’ is a biological myth (Saini, 2020). This echoes Fields and Fields’ (2022) warning about the practice of racecraft, the ‘magical process’ that makes the fiction of ‘race’ real. This happens when the notion of ‘race’ is used as an explanatory or descriptive category. What we need to do, they say, is “observe racecraft in action, study its moves, listen to its language, and root it out” (ibid, p.290). As Kostet and Verschraegen warn, a “focus on whiteness as a clearly defined category runs the risk of a-historicising and simplifying whiteness, neglecting other facets of identity and power dynamics” (Kostet and Verschraegen, 2024, p.12). Whiteness is not static or fixed and floats in a sea of relational differences, whether of gender, class, sexuality or geography (Hall, 1997). Steve Garner conceptualises whiteness in two paradoxical, but not mutually exclusive, ways: whiteness is invisible because as the norm it is never scrutinised; and whiteness is highly visible because of its power (Garner, 2007, p.34). Whiteness is both a system that benefits all those racialised as ‘white’, and a cultural identity – but not one chosen by all its beneficiaries. As Garner highlights, individual racism is often roundly decried by ‘white’ people who see racism as practised by ‘white trash’ and far-right extremists, but this means they manage to then ignore institutional racism and their role in it (ibid, pp.15, 78). This ‘being white while not being white’ is theorised by Charles Mills in *The Racial Contract* (1997), where he separates phenotype whiteness from a politico-economic whiteness dedicated to white supremacy. He claims that unquestioningly accepting the privileges of whiteness, and thereby being complicit with the system of white supremacy, is consenting to whiteness (ibid, p.106). But signing the racial contract is not obligatory; ‘white’ people have a genuine choice available to them, which requires rejecting the terms of the contract and speaking out against it. So, while whiteness is an identity for some, it is also an ideology, a lens and a currency. In all its forms it needs to be named for its role in racism, social inequity and injustice. However, the necessity of naming whiteness without further empowering it is a balancing act that

runs throughout my project. I seek to heed Emma Dabiri's demand that "we should invoke it [whiteness] only to slay it" (Dabiri, 2021, p.5).

To put porcelain to work in this way, I first started by making exhibitable objects (Figs.1-2) and then moved on to collaborating with participants in workshops, creating badges (Fig. 3).



Fig. 1: 'Pithy' (2022) Glazed porcelain, hand-painted cobalt decoration and gold lustre (30x18x16cm)



Fig. 2: 'Weaponised Whiteness' (2021) Porcelain, glass, glitter, glycerine, water (8x11cm)



Fig. 3: 'Making Whiteness Seen But Not Heard' (2023) Unfired porcelain badges made in workshops

Reflecting on these approaches, I felt that, although they had their merits, they were not useful vehicles for 'imagining otherwise', focusing as they did on current and historical white oppression. This understanding pushed me to deliberate on what I was aiming for in terms of an anti-racist practice. This required an analysis of the two traditions of

anti-racism – liberal and radical – that have developed within the context of multiculturalism and racism in the UK. The divide that splits these two camps can be summed up by the words of Ambalavaner Sivanandan: “People’s attitudes don’t mean a damn to me... Racism is about power, not prejudice” (Sivanandan, 1990, p.65). Anti-racism’s ideological split concerns how to tackle racism. Liberal anti-racists, for example, come under fire for focusing on policing the correct use of racial terms, rather than taking direct action. This, as Sivanandan stressed, is absolutely justified, since “abolishing a word does not abolish the social forces it expresses” (ibid). Radical anti-racists call for wholesale structural change and the end of capitalism. The roots of this approach lie in the non-Western contributions to Enlightenment universalism, such as that which inspired the Haitian revolution. This universalism was anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, rejected liberal individualism and embraced collective action. It was a philosophy embodied by Frederick Douglass, Sylvia Pankhurst, Claude McKay and CLR James, among others (Malik, 2023, p.271). However, this radical perspective was killed off by the era of Racial Awareness Training in the 1980s that Sivanandan so scorned, when a focus on educating individuals about their racism successfully severed racism from an “exploitative white power structure”.² Losing this universalist focus means a sense of common humanity is also lost, making singular identities more polarised and identity politics more influential (ibid, p.261). This individualistic understanding of anti-racism focuses on attitudes and changing minds, and is rooted in the belief that racism stems from a personal irrational moral failure. However, as Kundnani (2023) highlights, the core problem of racism is not individually held irrational beliefs, but that it exists as a societal force independent of whether most people subscribe to it or not (ibid, p.30). He is convinced that the type of anti-racist strategy that focuses on educating one mind at a time achieves nothing and that anti-racism has to be about more than personal development for people privileged by structural racism (ibid, pp.4-5). Anti-racist activists such as Azfar Shafi and Ilyas Nagdee (2022) are also keen to refocus efforts on the radical approach; the position they take ties racism closely to the uneven distribution of economic resources among different racial groups.

With the above analysis in mind, I use anti-racism to refer to “the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organisational structures,

² See A. Sivanandan on Racism Awareness Training, speaking in Manchester, 1982
<https://asivanandan.com/rat-and-the-degradation-of-black-struggle/>

policies, practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably”.³ However, as Kundnani writes, “structural racism circulates through individual attitudes and behaviours, sometimes unconsciously...” (Kundnani, 2023, p.4), which suggests to me that working with individuals, as I do in my events and workshops, could have potential for anti-racist learning. Racism as defined by Sivamohan Valluvan is no aberration, but

“an accrued set of state practices, discursively embedded assumptions, and also everyday perceptions that guide both governance but also our popular conceptions of identity, community and general subjectification” (Valluvan, 2022, p.466).

It is these everyday perceptions, conceptions, assumptions and practices that are worth focusing on, while recognising that the liberal, interpersonal approach alone is inadequate. As Sivanandan reminded us, there is an important distinction between the racism that discriminates and the racism that kills (Gordon, 2014), but perhaps raising individual consciousness of complicity in systemic oppression has some potential as a starting point for anti-racism, before going on to think much more critically about the structural upholding of racism.

Considering how porcelain could assist me in bringing people together to witness plural perspectives on oppressive whiteness led me to the idea of the gift of hospitality as a method of anti-racist praxis. I decided to make a series of porcelain dinner plates and invite a group to come together, share a meal and start to ‘imagine otherwise’. A ceremonial dinner service can connote gestures of grandeur and performing privilege, but this work was designed as an act of non-hierarchical generosity. I hoped that sitting down and sharing food would create an opportunity to ask what freedom from whiteness could look like, learning from each others’ differing positions and contributions, as well as potential silences. Coming together over a meal is very different from a workshop and I wanted the event to provide the necessary conditions to ‘tarry together’, a process that

³ Attributed to NAC International Perspectives: Women and Global Solidarity and accessed at <https://www.aclrc.com/anti-racism>

“encourages forms of courageous listening, humility and the capacity to be touched, to be shaken by those black bodies and bodies of colour that have achieved and honed degrees of epistemic complexity regarding white racism” (Yancy, 2015, p.26).

An important part of the curation of this event was my invited guests; they were largely friends I have made during my PhD research, most of whom are engaged in thinking critically about colonial history, race and decoloniality. I felt it was important to have this common degree of ‘racial’ literacy so that the space would feel safe enough to share and witness examples of lived experience, both as oppressed and oppressors. As a group they brought a very broad range of perspectives and intersectional marginalities. This was my invitation to them:

“My inspiration for this event draws on Aimé Césaire’s call ‘to dare to imagine a radically different way of living and invent the marvellous. Write revolutionary graffiti across the ‘great’ texts of Western civilisation. Write poetry’. I am using the plates I have made for you to immortalise others’ poetry as a means and source of revolt, and as a conversation starter. This dinner will give us an opportunity to ‘write poetry’ and ‘imagine otherwise’, as Lola Olufemi suggests – to dare to dream of what a future delinked from the colonial matrix of power and white supremacy might look and feel like. What can we hope for in these dark days of ongoing settler colonial atrocity? This dinner will provide a space to respect each others’ positions, contributions and silences.”

I made each guest a bespoke porcelain plate hand painted in cobalt blue and gold lustre with quotes from African diaspora writers along with imagery of plants and flowers found in the Caribbean (Fig. 4). I decided to again use the classic blue-and-white aesthetic of imported East Asian porcelain as a way of transferring the symbolic value of this material language from oppressor to oppressed. Immortalising diaspora poets’ words in ceramic follows Aimé Césaire’s requirement that poetry be used as a source of knowledge and revolt and that Black voices be centred in the rewriting of the colonial history of subjugation (Césaire, 2000). The quotes I chose all referenced emancipatory hopes, freedom dreams and decolonial struggles in some way, chosen with each guest in mind. For example, the words of Vanessa Kisuule, “Take up space, don’t wait for permission or approval; the journey has been long, but



Fig. 4: 'Vanessa Kisuule plate' (2023) Glazed porcelain, hand-painted cobalt and gold lustre (25cm)

now you can take up space, in any way you choose”, felt apt for one particular guest. Before we sat down to eat I asked them to choose which plate spoke to them most. About half of them chose the plate I had in mind and in some cases this was because the imagery had been more of a draw than the words. This activity served as a good icebreaker and the participants’ thoughts on their choice informed a large part of our conversation over the first part of the dinner. We then moved on to a more general discussion about what freedom meant for all of us from our different and yet not separate experiences, in the universalist sense that informed early radical anti-racism. This is also inspired by Fred Moten who says that: “The condition within which we live is one of difference without separability... the brutality of life emerges out of our refusal

or our disavowal of that fact” (Moten, 2014). The separateness created by individualism creates ‘the other’, so creating a space of safety and intimacy allows us to become sufficiently entangled to discuss freedom from whiteness. Just as the work of the Combahee River Collective highlighted, the focus of liberatory struggle needs to be on forging alliances across differences, not closing ranks along group interest lines (Táiwò, 2022). Important here too is Freire’s emphasis on the need to recognise the part of the oppressor deeply rooted within us, and which knows the oppressor’s tactics and relationships, and to do this by looking critically at the world through dialogical encounter with others (Lorde, 2007, p.116). This is about dialogue as a genuine way of learning and knowing, going far beyond a conversation to create new knowledge based on lived experience. To paraphrase Claudia Rankine, we need to have proper messy conversations about the true nature of whiteness and racism if we are to begin to visualise a world beyond them (Rankine, 2020, p.39). As Australian Aboriginal activist Lilla Watson so powerfully recognised, once we realise liberation for the oppressor is bound up with liberation for the oppressed, then we can work together.⁴



Fig. 5: ‘Decolonial Dreaming Dinner’ (2023)

⁴ See <https://lillanetwork.wordpress.com/about/>



Fig. 6: 'Decolonial Dreaming Dinner' (2023)

The dinner felt like a genuinely joyful act of community in resistance to the separateness and fracturing that whiteness imposes, which was reflected in some of the feedback I received from guests:

“The intimate nature of the event made it an extremely safe space to speak frankly about my own family history of indentured servitude, partition and generational trauma. It also gave me the opportunity to speak of hope and implementing decoloniality into my own parenting and work. The entire process was a reclamation of the power in connection between those with lived experience of colonisation and those who dedicate their working lives to some kind of betterment of decoloniality.”

“There was a sense of healing in sharing our stories and pain. I have never felt closer to a decolonial future. This should be the future of decolonial dreaming for us; relaxed, therapeutic spaces that allow participants to imagine and hope for a future free from white supremacy.”

“I felt like I had a voice. I felt like practising deep listening. I thought that I belonged. This work is a spark. We need to promote more spaces like this. More eating. More sharing. More humanisation. Promote possibilities for people to engage, unlearn and undo – a plurality of voices. Then, we will be experiencing otherwise.”

After the dinner, I asked guests to design their own plates in response to our dreams of freedom as a way of materially cementing these hopes, and this series will be used in the next iteration of the event (Figs. 7-8). Minnie Bruce Pratt, in *Identity: Skin Blood Heart* (Pratt, 2009 (1984)), reflects on her growth into consciousness and activism. She believes that to know how to act against racism, or even to know a situation is racist, requires judgement, ethics and feeling. Developing these relies on gathering up both information and “the threads of life that connect us to others” (ibid, p.38). To get outside your own cultural, racial and social boundaries you must be willing to face how much you do not know, and I hope that the Decolonial Dreaming Dinner event provided an opportunity for this. It is important that those who benefit from whiteness become increasingly conscious of their power and privilege in relation to marginalised others. Focusing on what whiteness does rather than what whiteness is, has the greatest potential for effective anti-racist action. As Judith Butler said:

“To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance – to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient ‘I’ as a kind of possession.” (Butler, 2005, p.136)



Figs. 7-8: 'Freedom Dreams' plates (2023) Glazed porcelain, cobalt and gold lustre (25cm)

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