

Intersectionality

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Introduction

Before starting this reflective essay, I acknowledge that the work of feminist anthropologists is not timeless and covers a vast range of ideas such that I do not assert that my learning condensed here is in any way exhaustive. The poem I wrote below speaks to the unevenness of inequality, focusing on intersectionality, multiple axes of gendered inequality, and resistance through corporeal practices.

- L1** Gender inequality is not equal
I am not even equal
To the sum of my parts which is not
and never is equal
To you:
- L5** My skin is not peelable, but I/we
peel it anyway
Orange skin or organic skin – peel
Can you tell the difference?
I move too quickly for ~~the~~
~~patriarchy~~ you to tell the difference
Slap/silence me anyway
- L10** But not in the same way as you do
her

If I listen, I am obedient;
Honourable.
If I listen but don't follow through I
am not obedient.
If I don't listen but follow through I
am disobedient.
Listen to me now:
- L15** Stop telling me what I can(not) do

What I should(not) look like
What I would be if I just
Stop for a moment and listen
To another man, another ad.
- L20** Switch state.

(Do) I (do) have to escape
But it is my mind
So it is mine
I have to destroy
- L25** My body and

My mind is no longer mine
How far can I run within the corners
of my mind
Within the corners of this earth
Where is my place find me
- L30** My place

I have no place to escape

Intersectionality and the Socially Constructed “Skin”

In my poem, I wrote ‘gender inequality is not equal’ (L1) because the way that various aspects of an individual (‘the sum of my parts’) (L3) – race, gender, class, social and historical contexts – are given social meaning and how the positions individuals have within various hierarchies affect individuals differently. I found this crucially important to understand any form of inequality. We must holistically analyse the various inequalities that intersect, compound and asymmetrically amplify the experience of exclusion and oppression of individuals and communities.

I found that Elizabeth Chin’s (1999) *Ethnically Correct Dolls: Toying with the Sex Industry* provided a good model to understand inequality through intersectionality. It gave a clear example of the importance of intersectionality when adopting measures to address inequality. I found it extremely frustrating to read that in an attempt to ‘address the problem of minority representation’ (Chin 1999:305), Mattel’s black Shani dolls not only failed

to address inequality and exclusion, but instead cemented it further. The dolls could ‘only incompletely embody the experiences of kids who are not simply racial beings, but also poor, working class, young, ghettoized, and gendered’ (Chin 1999:306). The failure of the Shani dolls stemmed not only from their inability to address the other axes of inequalities that the children faced, but also cemented and reproduced the exoticisation and idealised stereotypical features of minority groups. I could not comprehend how large companies like Mattel could fail repeatedly over the years - not just in this instance of the black Shani dolls but in various ‘ethnic’ or ‘world’ Barbies - to close the gap and fill the missing spaces of other ethnic groups in the toy industry. Mattel also poorly represented my own ethnic group in their 2004 depiction of a ‘Chinoiserie’ Barbie scantily clad in a ‘pyjama suit’ (Figure 1) with stereotypically smaller eyes (Mattel 2020). The “China Barbie Doll”, released in 2011, had a product description ‘Ni hao! That’s how I say hello!’ (Mattel 2020). This made me question how much sincerity Mattel invested in its effort to bridge the minority gap when the dolls they produced bordered on racist.



Instead of confronting race as a social construct and subjective experience, Mattel's dolls emphasised race based on physical features and cemented idealistic, stereotypical imaginings of the featured minority groups. While I acknowledge that there was an attempt to include different ethnic groups, the dolls drew on Western notions of race as based on 'difference and phenotype' (Chin 1995:308) and '[reproduced] the error of misplaced concreteness' (Chin 1995:307). The obsession with locating racial difference only in physical, visible markers obscures how these features are imbued with socially constructed symbolic meaning to signify race. This made me think of how, despite progressive changes, many still base ideas of sex and gender on dominant hegemonic ideas of masculinity and femininity, greatly emphasising the divide between the two. These ideas and symbols are meaningful only insofar as we give meaning and significance to them.

However symbolic or immaterial 'social constructs' may seem, they have concrete and material consequences for the reality of individuals living within hierarchical structures that exclude and oppress them. I also found it disturbing that the underlying discourse/idea of the 'ethnically correct' dolls was based on an inverted logic that 'toys ... are responsible for the children's perceptions [self-hatred and racism], not the society that produces them' (Chin 1991:310). Disturbed as it made me feel, is this not the hyper-consumerist world we live in? From commercial products to social media, material things have become part of our understanding of self and a tool for social

relations. While social media appears to focus more on social interaction than dolls, I felt that the underlying trend is similar. Both fundamentally present an idealised 'Other' or 'Self'. Social media has been transformed, engineered, and monetised to more than just allowing social connection, it has cemented idealised versions of both Other and Self. Similarly for gendered inequalities, when unmanaged, the individual could internalise comments about their supposed 'failure' to emulate the perfectly gendered body based on ideas of femininity and masculinity. It is on the 'skin' and body that socially constructed ideas of race, gender and other inequalities are marked. Scientifically, the 'skin is not peelable' (L5), in a sense that physically it is difficult for us to peel away the characteristics that are socially imbued with meaning, but 'I/we peel it anyway' speaks to our resistance and the malleability of these socially constructed meanings and inequalities.

Multiple Axes of Gendered Inequality

In the poem I underlined 'the patriarchy' to show how the dominant understanding (even my own, prior to reading more widely feminist anthropological texts) is rooted in male dominance over female submission and the heteronormativity bias. I cancelled out 'the patriarchy' and used 'you' instead to recentre the focus to understand varied forms of gendered inequality present in other relationships and settings. I admit I do not fully understand how gendered inequality permeates and works in all various arenas

and relationships, but here I attempt to reflect on (1) how we can question dominant Western assumptions, and (2) the role of the state in producing and perpetuating gendered inequalities.

Divergence from a Singular Western Gaze

I found Strathern's 1984 text on women and exchange in Highlands New Guinea helpful and important as she advocated different models of thinking. She showed how the Western understanding of the subject:object dichotomy was too fixed in ideas of personhood, agency and 'control over the product of [the individual's] own labour' (Strathern 1984:162, emphasis added), or the lack of it to fully analyse the exchange of women and their labour. Women, regarded as 'valuables ... are not always treated as objects in the Western sense, [and] are not to be understood as 'property' if property entails objectification' (Strathern 1984:164). Regardless of how convinced I was of her narration of the Hagen model of thought, I found the underlying principle more important and crucial. I feel that as an anthropologist investigating any society, we have a moral and ethical responsibility to our interlocutors and their society to portray their understandings as accurately as possible and utilise their ways of thinking to understand their society. While it is impossible to neutralise our thought from cultural biases, it is important to recognise and be open to local ways of thinking. My anxiety of how we would truly know what inequality looks like in a society (let alone measure it) is soothed only by Leacock's repeated

emphasis on the importance of analysing '*qualitatively different relations*' (1992:225, emphasis added), rather than quantitatively measuring inequality. I find this extremely important for fear we reproduce an added layer of inequality through our anthropological text, positioning our voice over that of the 'Other'.

State Control over Women's, but Not Men's, Bodies

After reading more feminist anthropological texts, I felt that my understanding of patriarchy was the centrepiece of gendered inequality. Reading Hill Gates' 1989 study of late imperial China, I saw how the patriarchy had social, political, and material consequences on the lives of Chinese women.

While there is much more that Gates has covered in the text, I focused on her analysis of Chinese characters. She points out that the family (家 *ja*) was a 'microcosm of the great *guojia* [国家] or "nation-family"' (Gates 1989:801, Chinese characters added). I included the simplified Chinese character (国家) because in contrast to the traditional Chinese writing, 國家, each seemed to suggest different nuances. Chinese characters each have their individual meanings and strokes which are not arbitrary but can be an amalgamation of different characters or visually represent an idea. While Gates focused on the second character (家) which means family, I found the first character to be of just as much significance. The traditional

version (國家) has the character 域 within it, which refers to fief or land. Compared to the simplified version (国家) which includes the character 王 or 玉, which means King and jade respectively, this implies ideas of patriarchy and wealth more directly than 'fief' or 'land'. While there may not be much concrete significance or symbolism here, I found it interesting that in ancient Imperial China, patriarchal ideas were conflated with the state and family, despite it not featuring prominently in writing. Simplified Chinese was only established in 1949, after the Republican Revolution ended the reign of the last Emperor. While the ideas of patriarchy appeared less authoritative, as there was no longer an emperor with a heavenly mandate to dictate cultural norms and rule of law, fundamental ideas of the state control over women's bodies were still heavily influential.

For me, the most profound/disturbing concept, also echoed in other feminist anthropological readings, is the control of the body by the state, indirectly or directly. In late imperial China, 'the pressure on women to bear sons was especially intense, because males provided a labour force and brought capital for the family, and '[g]ood women submit, always to male authority' (Gates 1989:813). The state promoted cultural value systems which enforced 'women's submission to extreme pronatalism as well as to labor discipline' (Gates 1989:818). In 1979, China introduced the one-child policy in order to curb China's rapidly growing population. It still remained that boys were favoured over girls. This policy sat on the other extreme end of the spectrum

of state control over the sexual bodies of women – they may only have one child, and that child should be male.

This also brought to mind Roberts' (2012) description of Ecuadorian women's body being in an indirect relationship with the state. I felt that the examples of Chinese and Ecuadorian women presented both ends of the spectrum of Foucault's (1977) idea of the body as subject to technical disciplinary processes and management such that the social and political norms are embodied and embedded within the self-disciplining body (McVeigh 1997:217, in Ashikari 2003:7). Women in imperial China were disciplined by the state and wider social and economic norms to produce more children. In contrast, Ecuadorians tried to distance themselves from the state and public care, which was marked by the caesarean section scar, which symbolised 'upward mobility ... [and that] they could not give birth "normally", that they had the means to overcome their dysfunction, and that they were not made subject to state neglect in public medical facilities' (Roberts 2012:233). However, I understood this act in itself as a self-disciplining act that reproduced gendered inequality, since '[e]lite men's bodies remain potent while caesarean section disciplines and limits elite women to two children' (Roberts 2012:221). Despite the caesarean section scar being seen by the women as Whitening and differentiating themselves 'from their browner, poorer empleadas' (Roberts 2012:225), I could not help but think that while they succeeded in securing a better position along the racial/class hierarchy

and resisted the control of the state over their bodies, they reproduced gendered inequalities. Women's bodies had to be invaded, while men's remained untouched.

Resistance

In this final section, I reflect on the different modes of resistance – whether they are a 'resistive resilience' or an internalisation of the gendered inequalities. Mikiko Ashikari's fieldwork of middle-class Japanese women in 1996-1997 showed how resistance against the dominant 'ideological division by gender – *soto* (outside the home)/men and *uchi* (home)/women' (Ashikari 2003:4), involved balancing resistance and accommodating what is 'proper, normal' (Ashikari 2003:23). I found the concept of 'multiplicity of selves, subjectivities and identities' particularly helpful in seeing forms of resistance not as a straightforward defiance, but a calculated act and risk, where the individual also had to perform and behave within the dominant gender discourse in order to negotiate the benefits that arise from power structures. 'Wild' women acted in ways which resisted the dominant gender ideology, but '[w]hen they go to work, they wear the standard color of foundation, instead of a darker tone, even though their bodies are now tanned' (Ashikari 2003:25). This was necessary to 'negotiate better positions within gender relations' and also 'accommodate to *soto* by taking a subject position of "subordinated women", [to] gain power over men' (Ashikari 2003:20). I felt that this reflected 'resistive resistance', a term I use to allude to the idea that resistance

does not always entail or portray itself as an extreme deviation or rejection of the dominant ideology that underlies gendered inequalities. It was about nuanced, calculated resistance, and knowing when certain actions were effective and appropriate in ultimately negotiating better social positions, rather than to be taken as a passive internalisation of the discourse.

In contrast, cosmetic surgery done by Asian-American women featured in a study by Eugenia Kaw (1991) left me confused and frustrated – I could not discern whether the cosmetic surgery was truly done in resistance to the 'patriarchal definitions of femininity and to Caucasian standards of beauty' (Bordo 1990 in Kaw 1991:78), or as an internalisation of these discourses. I also found it problematic that despite her interlocutors saying that 'they are "proud to be Asian American" and that they "do not want to look white"', Kaw insists that their cosmetic surgeries were a 'potent form of self, body and society alienation' (Kaw 1991:77) and evidence of '[motivations] by a racial ideology that infers negative behavioural or intellectual characteristics from a group's genetic facial features' (1991:79). Hence, I thought that the ethnographic material Kaw drew on did not correspond directly with her inferences and analysis. As Asian myself, we are fed a diet of the standard ideals of beauty, but while it does not always necessarily imply that should we actively choose to pursue these goals, it must mean that we are passively internalising racialised and gendered beauty ideals. Furthermore, I found that

Kaw's line of argument and criticism of the surgeries, seen by her as 'not ... a celebration of their [own] bodies', echoed ideas raised by Pitts-Taylor (2003) in her work on bodily modifications and various feminist viewpoints. Radical feminists argue that body modifications 'violate the body and reproduce oppressive relations of power by echoing patriarchal violence' (Pitts-Taylor 2003: 73). They seem to suggest that the 'pristine, natural, organic body – a body unmolested by culture – would be a primary resource for resisting patriarchy' (Pitts-Taylor 2003:54).

These two ideas left me feeling defeated, hence the line 'Orange skin or organic skin – peel / Can you tell the difference?' (poem L5-6). Orange skin depicts the/my Asian face, while organic skin represented the organic, natural body that radical feminists argue must be left untouched. My frustration arises because even when Asian women try to negotiate a better social position within racial and gendered hierarchies - no matter how superficial it may seem - through enhancing their beauty, their act of resistance is then subverted and criticised as 'not organic' or an internalisation of the hegemonic discourse. My frustration is – can you tell the difference anyway? What we choose to do with our bodies again comes under the criticism and gaze 'what I can(not) do / What I should(not) look like' (L15-16). Is this not a reproduction of the gendered inequality in discourse?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the work of feminist anthropology on gendered inequality has

made me realise that the various axes of inequality intersect asymmetrically and produce vastly different experiences of exclusion and oppression. Feminist anthropology on gendered inequality has also given me the vocabulary and tools to analyse gendered inequalities and locate them in relations and situations other than just the patriarchy and conjugal relationships. While I found the notions of the 'idealised Other' and 'Self' based on physical traits to be frustratingly intractable in the discourse and practice of gendered inequality, I also felt hopeful when reading about various resistive practices. Perhaps it is time to shift the discourse from one of reducing exclusion to increasing inclusion. This entails actively taking into consideration local models of thinking to analyse gendered inequalities and resistive corporeal practices. I found it paramount to empathetically understand the conditions and limitations in which the women found courage and space to engage in resistive practices. While there is more to be said on the limitations and effectiveness of these practices, I found that framing resistive practices in certain ways could either empower or reproduce structures of inequality. Hence, reading the works of feminist anthropologists helped me to understand gendered inequalities through multiple perspectives, but also left me frustrated when nuances were not fully taken into consideration.

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