

Racial Dis/Embodiment: A Discourse Theoretical Analysis of University International Offices' Websites

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between embodiment and visual representations of racial diversity on university campuses. The study analyzes the visuals found on the websites of international student offices at all twelve Swiss universities. Using a discourse theoretical approach as a basis for qualitative document analysis, the paper identifies examples of racially embodied and disembodied presence and absence that govern context-specific forms of representation (Hook, 2008; Lentin, 2019). These findings suggest a novel interdisciplinary understanding of Whiteness in Switzerland that characterizes racialized space as not only characterized by the presence of White bodies but also their (partial) absence. Furthermore, this research brings the undertheorized aspect of race to the fore within studies of international higher education, particularly in the underrepresented topic of visual discourses in Europe. Finally, the paper discusses the need for nuanced understandings of diversity representation in education.

Keywords: embodiment, race, representation, visual discourse, whiteness

Resumen

Este artículo explora la relación entre la encarnación y las representaciones visuales de la diversidad racial en los campus universitarios. El estudio analiza las imágenes encontradas en los sitios web de las oficinas de estudiantes internacionales en las doce universidades suizas. Utilizando un enfoque teórico del discurso como base para el análisis cualitativo de documentos, el artículo identifica ejemplos de presencia y ausencia racialmente encarnada y desencarnada que gobiernan formas de representación específicas del contexto (Hook, 2008; Lentin, 2019). Estos hallazgos sugieren una novedosa comprensión interdisciplinaria de la blancura en Suiza que caracteriza el espacio racializado no solo por la presencia de cuerpos blancos, sino también por su (parcial) ausencia. Además, esta investigación resalta el aspecto poco teorizado de la raza en los estudios de educación superior internacional, particularmente en el tema poco representado de los discursos visuales en Europa. Finalmente, el artículo discute la necesidad de comprensiones matizadas de la representación de la diversidad en la educación.

Palabras clave: blancura, discurso visual, encarnación, raza, representación

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Resumo

Este artigo explora a relação entre corporificação e representações visuais da diversidade racial em campi universitários. O estudo analisa imagens encontradas nos websites dos escritórios de estudantes internacionais em doze universidades suíças. Usando uma abordagem teórica do discurso como base para a análise qualitativa de documentos, o artigo identifica exemplos de presença e ausência racialmente corporificadas e descorporificadas que governam formas de representação específicas do contexto (Hook, 2008; Lentin, 2019). Essas descobertas sugerem uma nova compreensão interdisciplinar da branquitude na Suíça, que caracteriza o espaço racializado não apenas pela presença de corpos brancos, mas também por sua ausência (parcial). Além disso, esta pesquisa traz à tona a raça como aspecto pouco estudado nos estudos de educação superior internacional, sobretudo no que diz respeito ao tópico sub-representado dos discursos visuais na Europa. Finalmente, o artigo discute a necessidade de entendimentos diferenciados da representação da diversidade na educação.

Palavras-chave: branquitude, corporificação, discurso visual, raça, representação

Introduction

The relationship between institutional discourses and diversity remains fraught. Few scholars would discount the importance of diverse, intercultural collectives to enrich social contexts. Diversity discourses in universities indicate deeper ideological investments in hierarchies shaped by differences such as race, gender, nationality, dis/ability, class, etc. International exchange programs are a prime example of dynamic interplays between varied concepts of diversity. This paper addresses the representation of racial diversity on university websites by exploring how representations of race construct imaginaries of inclusion and exclusion, which shape admission decisions (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), classroom interactions (Wadsworth et al., 2008), and how students form social relationships during their studies (Houshmand et al., 2014). The research presented here answers the call for more research on university websites. The analysis identifies visual discursive markers using Discourse Theoretical Analysis (hereafter DTA) in representations of students, campuses, and university life on international office websites to highlight specific forms of inclusion and exclusion (Estera & Shahjahan, 2019; Miller-Idriss et al., 2019).

While some scholarship has argued for the importance of institutional diversity discourses (Haapakoski & Pashby, 2017), a relative lack of research on embodied differences in visual representation has resulted in an underdeveloped understanding of visual dimensions of difference and its impact on power relations both during and beyond university study. Vertovec (1996) noted that representation is a “politics of presence” because any representation necessarily shows some forms of presence but not others (p. 2). The question of representation of institutions (i.e., through promotional materials, websites, and all forms of spoken, written, and visual discourse) is a question of vision: should representation be accurate or aspirational? Should universities accurately represent their facilities and student body as they are, or should they show what they could potentially be? These questions guide the debate around the role of institutional will to diversify and characterize the tension between international and local efforts to include manifestations of diversity (Ahmed, 2012).

This paper is conceptually and methodologically undergirded by an “otherwise approach” that emphasizes that “race and colonialism are embedded in modern systems of knowledge production, governance, and capital accumulation” (Andreotti et al., 2018, p. 11). This approach makes visible how the past reproduces itself in the present, exposing the power relations that created and sustain current hierarchies. Coloniality, the “continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, [which] produced colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system.” (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 219), is an undergirding part of the theoretical framework. Thinking through the colonial influences of race in the field of education is a step to be completed before combating forms of inequality (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Thus, race emerges as a salient factor in structuring relations through representation.

Engaging with embodied notions of Whiteness in Switzerland is crucial in the liberatory politics of race critical theory, pedagogy, and practice (Boulila, 2019). This paper identifies racial hierarchies in a context where White European

self-conception is accepted as the norm, rendering anybody outside of that epistemically and ontologically Other (Stein & Andreotti, 2018). Identifying nuances in the representation of Whiteness in an under-researched context opens the floor for a critical engagement with race in Switzerland. In the education context, discourses of racial differences are subsumed into nationality, rendering the concept of race unspeakable and, thus, disallowing critical discussions of representation at institutional and national levels (Hernandez, 2021). The unspeakability of race in Europe stems from an affective investment in current power hierarchies, preventing the development and use of language around topics of racial inequity. Identifying discursive structures in the public setting of university websites is a key step in calling into question hegemonic notions of monoracial Switzerland (Ossipow et al., 2019).

For present purposes, this paper identifies imaginaries as discursive assemblages that allow some common-sense understandings of possible social contexts and phenomena as well as foreclose others (Kamola, 2014). This paper fills the gap produced by a lack of critical treatment of visibility in IHE research by addressing representations of race and nationality in IHE. The analysis traces the often-violent foreclosures of visual representations that result in the exclusion of marginalized people.

The first section contextualizes diversity and representation and outlines the need for more complex understandings of difference in cultural studies of education by presenting DTA as a useful tool for understanding macro-contextual cultural politics. Then, race and nationality are presented as dominant yet undertheorized forms of difference in IHE research. The following section further outlines Whiteness as a key defining factor of visual representation and demonstrates the uniqueness of the Swiss case. The paper also provides a description of the Swiss university system in this section. Then, the notion of racial dis/embodiment is presented relying on a discourse theoretical analysis of visual representations from all twelve Swiss universities. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications, limitations, and future research.

Cultural Discourse in International Higher Education

International higher education (hereafter IHE) provides a rich context to explore how representations of race, ethnicity, and nationality are reflected, refracted, and distorted within discourse across various contexts. Website visuals contribute to constructing social categories, centering visibility in the construction of whom and what is deemed legitimate, envisionable components of the future of higher education. Websites are integral communication platforms for globally communicating university identity (Bae et al., 2021; Estera & Shahjahan, 2019; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014). Furthermore, websites provide insight not only into “what it means to be a university student” (Svendsen & Svendsen, 2018) but also how student bodies and students’ bodies are constructed discursively through visual discourses. Particularly in a lesser-explored context, like Western Europe, analyses of how university representations shape and are shaped by cultural discourse shed light on emerging dynamics of difference.

Diversity representation in European universities has been characterized by colonial influences that shape discourses of inclusivity, admission rates, curricula, and policy practices (Kottmann et al., 2019). Analyses of university websites are a specific aspect of interrogating race discourses in Europe concerned with constructing the cultural Other (Hall, 1991). This race discourse establishes the “elaborate metaphor” of a racially homogeneous European population within societal imaginations (Hall, 1991, p. 18). Bearing in mind that universities can be considered drivers of societal change, representation in university contexts points out the contradictions of the exclusionary atmosphere within universities as colonial institutions (Unangst & Martínez Alemán, 2021).

The presence of individuals of diverse origins is a normative premise of academic mobility. Yet, scholars’ inattention to the embodied aspects of diversity in IHE research results in similarly homogenized analyses of difference. This article nuances studies of higher education in Western Europe by expanding on the argument that representations of diversity play an integral role in the discursive construction of reality (Miller-Idriss et al., 2019; Pieterse, 1993). Therefore, a unique theoretical perspective on the role of discourse is necessary.

The understanding that nothing meaningful can exist outside of discourse (Hall, 1992) is a deviation from contemporary conceptualizations of discourse in education. In contrast with other approaches to discourse analysis, DTA is an analytical and theoretical framework that is explicitly poststructuralist in its agenda (Howarth, 2000). Key here is the contrast between Critical Discourse Analysis’ approach to discourse-as-language and DTA’s approach to discourse-as-representation (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). DTA is particularly useful for analyses that seek to deconstruct the complicated interrelations

between and amongst representations, practices, and identifications and how those interrelations contribute to the generation of meaning (Carpentier & Cleen, 2007). This poststructural approach to discourse cannot be extricated from the theories and methods that undergird the present paper. Hence, this approach to discourse theory proves a valuable methodological guiding point for selecting tools from the Foucauldian “toolbox” that allows for an exploration of specific identities in relation to macro-level discourses, particularly about race and nation (Foucault, 1980).

Race and Nationality

Race is a geopolitically specific term “taken historically as (or in terms of) identifying people geomorphically by their supposed phenotypes in terms of their imputed or implied geographic origins and the cultural characteristics considered to be associated with those geographic identifications, those landscapes and their associated characteristics” (Goldberg, 2009, p. 7). For the present paper, race is conceptualized as a discrete visual marker of difference in the analysis of visual representation (Alcoff, 2005). This theoretical consideration brings the conversation back to a visually referential ontology of race (Saldanha, 2006) and illuminates visual conceptual indicators of race, contrasting the concept’s ‘taboo’ nature (Maneri, 2021).

Race is specific to geopolitical region, necessitating European-specific theorization (Goldberg, 2006). The current discursive landscape of Europe purports a “post-racial” society, in which explicit mentions of racial issues are taboo (Tate, 2016). Contemporary debates on this so-called post-racial society confirm an ongoing trend of rendering race “unspeakable” (Hernandez, 2021). This trend is reflected in, for example, discourses in countries like Germany and the UK, where issues of race are glossed over in an aspirational push to move “beyond” race that nevertheless upholds racial hierarchies (Clarke, 2021; Juang et al., 2021). This desire for a post-racial society deems any mention of race an antiquated attempt to bring up “old” grievances. These discourses reflect a deeper-seated privilege of “neutrality,” in which historical colonial violences and the resulting contemporary inequalities are erased.

In Switzerland, dominant discourses obscure the presence of non-White Swiss people and their experiences of racism, largely due to colonial amnesia regarding national history, particularly vis-à-vis its geographic neighbors (Purtschert et al., 2016). Switzerland is one of the few countries in Western Europe that rejects its colonial history due to its lack of formal colonies. However, race is visible due to the proliferation of images of non-White people in public media, which are often used to legitimize exclusionary strategies in discourses regarding immigration policy and social inclusion (Richardson & Wodak, 2009). Public media discourses in Switzerland frequently objectify non-White people, reflecting the marginalization of minority groups (Trebbe & Schoenhagen, 2011). Additionally, a “regime of raceless racism” (Michel, 2015, p. 411) renders speaking of racial issues (i.e., public debates, activism, etc.) more difficult due to race’s unmentionable nature. Because these discourses spotlight non-White individuals, Whiteness emerges as an unmarked, yet critical category (Gallagher & Twine, 2017).

Whiteness

Whiteness is an invisible ‘center’ that remains a powerful yet uncommented discursive construct that exerts its power in everyday life (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). In popular media discourses in Europe, Whiteness becomes a cipher for national belonging; non-White individuals are presented as a culturally incompatible threat to the nation (Hervik, 2019). This supposed cultural incompatibility manifests in visual representations of immigrants as non-White interlopers in White European countries (Picozza, 2021). The White/non-White dichotomy is necessary to maintain racial hierarchies that govern media and popular and political discourses in Europe (Beaman, 2018). However, Whiteness is a malleable category that structures hierarchies in ideological, symbolic, and material relations, including and beyond physical visual differences. The link between Whiteness and coloniality through the ongoing presence of historical legacies of inequity must be made here. The coloniality of Whiteness works to valorize Western/European forms of knowledge and embodiment (Hesse, 2007). While the analysis here focuses predominantly on the material and discursive nature of Whiteness, the construct’s ontological and epistemological realities form a backdrop for a deeper theoretical engagement with coloniality in international higher education (Takayama et al., 2017).

The current study shows the link between Swissness and Whiteness by highlighting contemporary manifestations of Switzerland's construction of Whiteness on university websites. This belief is perpetuated through a historical consciousness that, despite the explicit Swiss colonial activities in European colonies in the past, nevertheless relies on Whiteness and Swissness to create exclusionary racial hierarchies (Cretton, 2018). It further demonstrates the link between visibility and materiality by asserting that it is not merely through the presence of White bodies that physical spaces as affective landscapes become racialized. For example, Ahmed (2006) stresses that "we need to examine not only how bodies become white, or fail to do so, but also how spaces can take on the very "qualities" that are given to such bodies" (p. 129). Taking representation as a focal point builds upon studies that assert Whiteness as an embodied influence on the racialization of space.

Switzerland is a unique conglomeration of three main ethnolinguistic regions: German-speaking, French-speaking, and Italian-speaking. The Swiss case demonstrates how linguistic differences function within a national container; it allows for more specificity in the cultural domain as variations in nationality are held constant while linguistic, religious, and sociocultural dynamics change based on region. Furthermore, forms of Whiteness differ in Switzerland, as "some people are deemed more Swiss (and therefore more White) than others" (Hernandez, forthcoming). In this particular case, Italophones (i.e., Swiss-Italians, some Corsicans, residents of South Tyrol, etc.) and Italians are conflated and this group is viewed geographically and culturally closer to the physical and conceptual Global South, as it was historically the case in many waves of Italian migration in the United States (Guglielmo & Salerno, 2003) and elsewhere (Ann Martin, 2021). This racialization process results in Swiss-Italians' positioning adjacent to non-Whiteness. The tensions between the various ethnolinguistic groups often conflated as "racism" (typically leveraged at italophones) is one key point that demonstrates the uniqueness of the study (Giuliani, 2019; Stella & Franzina, 2002). Swissness is manifested through a nested form of Whiteness, in which some members of a predominantly White nation-state use their co-nationals to bolster their racial identity. Therefore, examining racial representation in Swiss IHE illuminates taken-for-granted notions of divisions between national and racial identity.

The present study addresses visual Whiteness as an ever-present force by expanding upon Alana Lentin's helpful characterization of David Hook's "racializing embodiment" (2008). Her paper argues that White people are afforded a "disembodied presence" in which Whiteness is invisibilized while impacting the social context (Lentin, 2019, p. 12). Additionally, non-White people are featured in the form of "embodied absence" that renders them visually present in ways that highlight their absence and marginalization (Lentin 2019, p. 12). Disembodied Whiteness can exist as a constant presence *regardless* of the physical presence of White/non-White bodies. This assertion of the ever-present nature of Whiteness develops findings of studies that conceptualize "racialized space" as solely embodied. For instance, in the education context, Walton asserts that classrooms take on a racialized quality due to the physical presence of White bodies that affectively constrain how students of color learn, interact, and participate (Walton, 2018). Notions of present and absent embodiment require a method capable of addressing the dense nuances of visual representation.

Methods

Switzerland represents an attractive case in terms of uniqueness and feasibility, due to the size and quality of its higher education system. The country's size allowed for data collection completeness; there are ten universities and two university-level federal research institutions. While there are other types of higher education institutions (i.e., vocational universities and other, more specialized programs), these institutions were outside of the scope of this research as the main international focus of Switzerland falls on the nationally-funded universities. Swiss higher education institutions are uniquely positioned in that they are regularly placed in the "top ten" universities globally according to multiple university ranking systems and are the only universities outside of the US and the UK to do so (*QS World University Rankings 2021: Top Global Universities | Top Universities*, 2021; *World University Rankings*, 2021). The unequal nature of university ranking systems notwithstanding (Shahjahan et al., 2017), this positioning of Switzerland's universities highlights their desirability, as international students often consult such ranking lists when making university decisions (Thakur, 2007).

The data for this study was collected from the websites of every Swiss university. While the "international student office website" may be an established medium for conveying information at many universities, Swiss university websites vary considerably. Therefore, the parameters for selecting data sources included entire websites or sections of main

university websites geared towards international students, for example, in English, with relevant information for international students, such as logistical information or how to study abroad at the host Swiss university.

The data were collected by accessing the websites, downloading individual pages, and converting them to a 2,938-page PDF document. The smallest university website comprised approximately seventeen pages, and the largest comprised 619, with an average of about 245 pages per university. Unsurprisingly, the larger, more prestigious federal research institutes located in the largest cities in the country, had the largest websites. The author collected the data for this paper during the latter half of 2019. The analysis was reviewed by a second, more senior researcher to bolster validity and underwent several revisions before arriving at the final categories. Ultimately, concepts adapted from DTA emerged as an insightful tool to analyze the collected data.

Imaginary tools

In Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of discourse theory, imaginaries are horizons that limit the discursive field of possibilities (Waetjen et al., 1997). The edges of these horizons are marked by "imaginary signifiers" (Laclau, 1990, p. 36). The term "imaginary" is not an adjective but denotes that these are signifiers *of* the imaginary. Signifiers are structural points that fortify the boundary of the imaginary within which meaning-making practices attempt to fix meaning and establish social, political, and ideological contexts (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Therefore, signifiers fix the borders of the imaginary between what is and what is not visible, thinkable, and possible. This study demonstrates how visual signifiers of race serve as nodal points that seek to fix meaning within imaginaries of inclusion/exclusion (Trivundža, 2015).

The analysis proceeded through reading the documents and identifying visual and discursive elements, following standardized steps of qualitative media analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). Photos were coded depending on the prevalence of signifiers of the embodied presence of Whiteness. For example, visual indicators of phenotypical Whiteness (i.e., fair skin, straight hair, light-colored eyes, etc.) were noted within images as signifiers. The signifiers corresponded to codes used in the next step of the analysis. Codes such as "White," "non-White," "male," "female," "student," "administrator," etc., showed both the quality and quantity of the occurrences of representations of predominantly race and gender as visual categories. The semiotic process of racial categorizing according to visuals is a heuristic that must consider race as a "sociopolitical category, and nothing more," which nevertheless impacts the lived realities of people of color globally (Gates, 1992). The space between external identification with racial categories and personal racial identity is an open and contested site that allows multiple meanings and interpretations. The analytical process was informed by careful considerations of Whiteness and race more generally as a socially constructed category (Lawrence & Hylton, 2022).

Additionally, the analysis is shaped by the researcher's positionality as a queer, Latinx/Black cisgender male (Brown, 2016). The researcher incorporated his firsthand experience of studying abroad in five different countries, where his racialized and gendered identities interacted with the majority population in different ways. The analysis is a product both of his embodied experience and analytical insight into the construction of racial dynamics in university spaces. For example, as a student studying abroad in a nearby Western European country, the researcher was approached multiple times to be photographed for university promotion and explicitly told it was due to his physical appearance. This experience led to the foregrounding of the visual analysis, and identification of the discursive dimensions presented in the findings.

The categories formed from grouping the heuristic codes identified alternative ideological underpinnings to how visual racial dynamics structure imaginaries produced by the website images, predominantly concerned with material colonial relations (Parameswaran, 2002). The nature of the research necessarily foregrounded race as a structural factor in shaping international students' representations, confirmed in the analysis through the unequal ratio of White/non-White students. While other visual representations of difference emerged (ability status, gender, age, etc.), this paper primarily addresses how visual racialization shapes imaginaries of inclusion and exclusion. The main conceptual categories of disembodiment/embodiment and absence/presence are key binaries that structure the visual diversity discourses in universities.

Findings

The analysis revealed interdependent signifiers that act as imaginary signifiers: Whiteness and non-Whiteness. Within the visual imagery, Whiteness functioned as an empty signifier filled with inclusive meanings, showing what is possible for White bodies within Swiss universities. The analysis revealed disembodied presence as a theme associated with Whiteness, as well as the embodied absence of bodies of color. This shows a further iteration of the malleability of Whiteness in different contexts illuminating how it functions to unite concepts of Swiss university identity in visual, material, and discursive ways. An important note: the images presented as figures representing a theme found in the data were all selected from a large dataset of images from the twelve Swiss universities collected by the author in 2019. For ethical reasons, specific universities are not mentioned. Rather, each image is presented as an illustrative example of themes found through the analysis.

Disembodied presence

White disembodied presence emerged as a nodal signifier that fixed the meanings of all other signifiers. Images of individuals with physical features associated with European ancestry: fair skin, light-colored eyes, straight hair, etc., predominated. The visual markers of Whiteness included not only the complete, recognizable bodily presence of White individuals but also several instances of lighter-colored/fair-skinned body parts, including eyes, hair, and, most predominantly, hands. These recognizable body parts are an example of *disembodied presence*, i.e., the visual presence of Whiteness that is only partially embodied. Visual signifiers fix meanings reliant upon non-logocentric stimuli; in other words, the viewer only has access to the image to make sense of what is being perceived (Langbehn, 2010). Images of White people in Switzerland can be viewed as inconspicuous, but DTA reveals macro-contextual aspects of discourse that constitute how the websites are interpreted through visual means (Trivundža, 2015).

Almost every university website featured at least one prominent example of disembodied hands. These examples included hands performing experiments, indicating choices, and engaging in tasks related to practicing agency in the university. Here, the key concept of agency is a matter of representation, defined as “consisting of the attribution of power and the formation and maintenance of subjectivity (Ci, 2005, p. 250). The attribution of power through representation (i.e. images of who can do what) suggests through subtle, ideologically-driven discursive moves that only those who are represented have agency. These images, therefore, facilitate the interpretation of agentic representation at the university. For example:

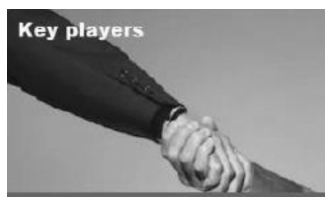


Figure 1.

These images typically featured “masculine” hands, often accentuated with masculine clothing, although feminine hands also appeared infrequently. These hands are not only a symbol of agency; they demonstrate, as the text in the above example says, who the “key players” are on campus. The articulation of Whiteness and masculinity as a dominant factor in representation is a common trend throughout much of the Global North (Shome, 2011). Representations of Whiteness and masculinity demonstrate a gendered and intersecting imaginary of inclusion/exclusion: Women and men of color are excluded from the narrative of success and agency communicated by the symbolism of White male hands. This is mutually constitutive with the ongoing colonial dynamics of inequity that characterize much of academia, and indeed, ongoing colonial relationships between raced and gendered people of various intersectional identities (Lugones, 2007). In the academy as a colonial space, the constant reinscribing of people of color as Other reifies the hegemonic position of White men (Ahmed, 2012). This dynamic results in continuous exclusions of those deemed ontologically and epistemologically outside of the university in material and discursive terms.

Another type of disembodied presence is images of blurred approximations and long-exposure shots of White individuals taken to give a general impression of a person without providing specific physical characteristics other than

vague senses of color and shape. These blurred representations of people appeared frequently to indicate masses of people ‘on the go’ in ways that indicate agency and direction. These representations showed this ‘on the go’ blur in the foreground and the background. For instance:



Figure 2.

The above examples demonstrate the form: these images represent people stripped of all but the barest physical characteristics. The long-exposure technique that creates transparent wisps of individuals transforms the subjects of the photos: the individuals go from humans to ephemeral wisps. One can only ascertain the size, shape, and color of the person’s clothing, hair, and skin. Other characteristics are left open to interpretation, but the physical features leave little room for the imagination: these figures are White, disembodied through their blurry outline, but nevertheless present. The repeated usage of after-image effects becomes hauntological; the people are there though they are no longer there (Derrida, 1994). The semi-translucent representations of White bodies become an effervescent reminder of the presence of Whiteness. Through this reminder, the presence of Whiteness attempts temporarily to fix the meaning of Whiteness as belonging and being included.

The signifier, in this case, takes on a less literal meaning than White skin; rather, the visuals depict disembodied figures to imply a sense of motion, multiplicity, and ephemerality. Often, the blurred figures take up much of the background or foreground, implying a mass or a crowd of fast-moving Whiteness. The technique of visually obscuring individuals yet leaving their Whiteness visible marks the imaginary of inclusion through visual impressions suggesting quick movement of disembodied presence of White bodies.

The owners of these White hands are never shown, yet the viewer can safely interpret them as belonging in the Swiss context; owners of White hands are not racially excluded in predominantly White environments. Thus, the hands and their Whiteness signify common practices and who performs them at the university. An “otherwise” critique of this phenomenon draws attention to the references to White agency, signaling an ongoing relationship of coloniality with the institutional space in which these references are made (Shahjahan & Morgan, 2016).

This trend is consistent with the other research in that it marks Whiteness as institutional belonging (Osei-Kofi et al., 2013; Picower, 2009; Shahjahan & Edwards, 2021) but it differs from other forms of Whiteness noted in the literature in that Whiteness is represented in partial bodily forms. Additionally, the bodies of Whiteness represented here are ambiguous in their representation of Swiss identity: do the disembodied hands belong to Swiss-German, Swiss-French, or Swiss-Italian people? This ambiguity highlights a tension between representations of Whiteness as unifying Swiss national identity, contrasted with ethnolinguistic divisions in the national ethos (Mottier, 2000; Zimmer, 1998).

Embodied presence

Whiteness emerged in ways that signified an *embodied presence* as well. Subjects coded as White emerged predominantly on the websites at a ratio of about 4:1, with students coded as non-White. In many cases, White students are shown in groups, indicating a collectivity not shown for non-White students. The following image is an example of this trend throughout the data:



Figure 3.

These images also position predominantly White subjects in front of recognizably Swiss backgrounds, further embedding them in the social context. Conversely, in instances where non-White subjects are represented, they are depicted in close-quarter shots that do not necessarily depict them as symbolically or physically a part of the Swiss context. This could be due to the use of stock photos or a desire to exhibit “internationality,” however, the effect remains the same: non-White subjects are tokenized. In contrast, White subjects are represented in ostensibly more authentic ways: presented more frequently, more candidly, in less obviously “posed” photographs, etc. This token representation works to fix the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion within the imaginary of the university.

The tendency to represent White people in this way is particularly noticeable in light of the numerical absence of students of color on campus and the overt representation of students of color on university websites. While there are no official racial statistics on campuses, several campuses provide statistics on the national origin of their students. This varies drastically from campus to campus; some campuses provide numbers of only foreign compared to domestic students, some provide numbers by continent, and some do not provide any information but assure the viewer of the website of the internationality of the campus through images. Nevertheless, for the websites that provide information, the number of students from countries with non-White majority populations remains minuscule, much less than the overall representation of non-White students within images.

The number of people of color represented on these university websites does not align with the few reported statistics of national origin for each university. The relative absence of non-White subjects, coupled with simplistic representations when they appear, demonstrates an underlying tension between aspirational and accurate representations of on-campus diversity. In contrast to research performed in contexts where racial demographics are known (Osei-Kofi et al., 2013), representation in Switzerland is sorely limited by this tension between aspiration and accuracy.

Embodied absence

One benefit of DTA is its capacity to trace hidden meanings. In the data set, specific symbolic violence is practiced through the erasure of meaningful representations of people of color that is “imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels.” (Bourdieu, 2001 quoted in Carpentier, 2017, p. 162). Compared to the disembodied presence, there are no instances of hands of color nor Black or Brown faces moving quickly through the scene. In a binary fashion, the disembodied presence of White individuals necessitates an embodied absence of non-White individuals. Embodied absence refers to “souls evacuated of psychological presence with the ‘psycho-materiality’ of objects animated by racist beliefs.” (Hook, 2008, p. 148). Images of people of color often present them engaging in a reduced range of activities, limiting them from the fullness of behaviors depicted for their White counterparts. The “evacuation of psychological presence” refers to an objectification present in, for example, the only images of groups of people of color representing them as token objects of study. One image from the dataset provides an example of this trend, which was taken from a general international office website highlighting study programs:



Figure 4.

Within this trend, non-White people are the colorful, attractive objects to highlight diversity without a sense of agency. The absence of any groups of students of color speaks volumes about the representation of social configurations on the university campus; while there were occasional groups consisting of a mixture of White and non-White people, the absence of larger collectives of non-White people is remarkable. An “otherwise” approach is interested in the underlying epistemologies for this kind of representation: how do colonial relations inform the selection of these images? Following the otherwise approach, the image of these bodies matters far more than their actual presence on campus. Tokenism as objectification means people of color are represented as not contributing to the social context of the university (Maguire & Britten, 2018).

The embodied absence is also constructed through the absence of names and titles in the images of people of color. On nine out of twelve university websites, disembodied heads with names and phone numbers for various White administrators were represented, demonstrating White individuals' widespread availability and accessibility as sources of knowledge. However, there was only one instance of an administrator of color and one of a professor of color. The tokenistic representations of people of color fix meanings of limited inclusion through embodied absence. The absence of meaningful representations of embodied individuals of color in which individuals are agentic, individual, and belonging highlights a lack of full presence at the university. To quote Alana Lentin (2019): “They are there, but not there” (p. 13).

Moreover, websites occasionally provide insight into the futures of students who attend their universities. Of the numerous reports of experiences of both international and domestic students, there were only two instances of a person of color depicted as an example of success. Additionally, only one of those instances presented the student as a successful university graduate. All other instances depicted alums as large groups of White individuals, providing a sense of collectivity denied to students of color. This representation contrasts the images of students of color, who are often depicted alone or surrounded by Whiteness. Taken together with the multitude of representations of successful White students on various websites, the representation of non-White people highlights not only an embodied absence of students of color but also an absence of futures in which those students are successful.

In the few instances of representations of non-White bodies, non-Whiteness signified an ambiguous space of inclusion. In general, non-White people are represented in ways that set them apart from their White counterparts; these include tokenistic representation focusing on the common inclusion of one member from various racial groups to ensure representativeness. These images could ostensibly be well-intentioned; nevertheless, the message communicated by the inclusion of these subjects entails a more complex view than “everyone is welcome.”

The ambiguity of including representation of people of color throughout the data in which they are only partially included exposes an imaginary of inclusion/exclusion. Within this imaginary, non-White subjects are depicted to signal a particular stance toward diversity, flattening it and rendering it consumable (Owens & Beistle, 2006), in line with the analysis of diversity representation by Sara Ahmed that evokes bell hooks’ evocative title “eating the other” (Ahmed, 2012; hooks, 1992).

Those who are visually different from the status quo (i.e., racialized differently) are depicted as an embodied absence within the Swiss context. The dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion is no less present in representations of non-majority

students, leaving the dynamic of representation up to the reader's interpretation. For example, non-White students are represented visually in online discourse and not marked in other ways that signify belonging to the Swiss context, even in national identification. While representation of people of color in the Swiss and larger European contexts has been gaining prevalence in the public sphere, the images analyzed for this study demonstrate continuing exclusion (Campt, 2017).

Discussion

This paper identified explicit and implicit themes within representation of race in Swiss universities, highlighting complexity in the notion of Whiteness as a present absence (Lentin, 2019). While Whiteness in this framework is taken largely as a representational visual category (Kallio-Tavin & Tavin, 2018), one cannot extricate the onto-epistemological position of Whiteness as a structuring factor in the construction of knowledges and the institutions that legitimize knowledge. This study provides concrete examples of the exclusions at a discursive and material level, opening up discussions for how universities approach diversity representation from a decolonial perspective. The representation of Whiteness in its embodied form also exemplifies notions of racialized modernity (Hesse, 2007), in which White institutional agents are viewed as superior to their non-White counterparts.

The visuals served to include White collectives and exclude non-White people through a binary manifested in representations of embodied absence and disembodied presence as signifiers of the modern/colonial global imaginary (Stein & Andreotti, 2017). These signifiers mark horizons that delimit what is and is not possible within the discursive and visual field (Torfing, 1999). For example, the discursive possibility of non-White people in positions of power or represented as the norm was non-existent despite the aspirational representation exhibited by the images. Thus, we return to the tension between aspirational and accurate representation. As Sara Ahmed (2012) has noted, diversity “involves the aesthetic realm of appearance, as well as the moral realm of value.” (p. 59). An analysis of the discursive and material underpinnings of university websites reveals the contours of a visual grammar that allows for a direct constraint on the aesthetics and morals of the university. These images are simultaneously inaccurate in that they do not represent the material reality of embodied diversity on campus and unaspirational in that they preclude the possibility of change moving forward.

In most cases, White people were represented performing a broader range of activities and in various social positions. This included agentic representations of White people making decisions, in positions of power, and as innocuous background figures. This representation suggests the disembodied presence of Whiteness as a key structuring force of imaginaries of inclusion/exclusion. Visual Whiteness is a signifier of inclusion, belonging, and normalcy within the imaginary of the Swiss university, which recenters the visual/material aspect of Critical Whiteness in discussions of inequality in internationalization, particularly outside of the United States (Bae et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the infrequent inclusion of non-White bodies demonstrated a lack of diverse representations for people of color. The absence of agency was signified through the objectification of non-White bodies as symbols of diversity that expressed meanings of exclusion and non-belonging. Moreover, this embodied absence of people of color exposed a lack of collective relationships with their White and non-White peers. Representation of this nature exposes tokenism isolating and symbolically violent nature within the Swiss university landscape (Gist-Mackey, 2020).

As with all research, this study possessed some limitations. The data collection and analysis were conducted by one researcher whose positionality resonated with specific aspects of discourse (i.e. race, ethnicity, sexuality, diversity) within his academic training. He was also assisted by only one senior researcher, rather than a larger team to mitigate bias. Furthermore, Switzerland is still a relatively small country, despite its position as a global hub of international higher education. However, the critical/interpretive nature of analyzing discourse is less concerned with positivist notions of replicability and generalizability and, indeed, more concerned with uncovering the possibilities obfuscated by imaginaries that foreclose alternative interpretations of social phenomena. Additionally, discourse analysis as an approach foregrounds discursive representation, as was the case in this study. However, future research can and should more deeply engage with the material realities of racial dis/embodiment at the university and beyond. One way to do this would be to empirically trace the impact of these representations on the physical presence of differently racialized bodies within the student population in Switzerland. While the unspeakable nature of race in Switzerland and Western Europe may present a challenge to this (Hernandez, 2019), DTA has begun to provide an analytical approach that can theoretically account for the interweaving of the discursive/representational and the material/physical (De Cleen et al., 2021).

The otherwise approach acknowledges the limits of critique and engages in self-reflection on how best to practice international higher education (da Silva, 2013). Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrates the relationship between epistemological, discursive representations and ontological, material exclusions. In resonance with previous research, Switzerland's alleged lack of formal colonies does not preclude relationships of coloniality within the current national context (Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015). An analysis of the visuals of university representation pushes this argument further by demonstrating that the university, as a site of knowledge production, is similarly positioned in perpetuating ongoing inequalities.

Conclusion

Overall, the data and analysis demonstrate that imaginaries of inclusion/exclusion within international student mobility are a complex discursive mosaic. The interwoven and contingent relationships between visual and textual representations of international students and the contexts in which they find themselves warrant further examination. This research provides further insight into the discussion on diversity representation in IHE in an underrepresented context with wide implications. Particularly in the landscape of growing neoliberal trends toward diversity, this research presents a nuanced discussion of how diversity may be imagined.

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