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### **A Revised Approach to Racism in Youth Multiculture: The Significance of Schoolyard Conversations about Sex, Dating and Desire**

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#### **Abstract:**

Anxieties about social cohesion in multicultural societies have prompted scrutiny of how young people negotiate culturally diverse spaces. A key perspective of the literature at the intersections of youth studies and urban multiculturalism is that young people shift between racist and convivial modes of relationality to navigate their complex social worlds. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a culturally diverse high school in Melbourne, Australia, I suggest that this binary framing fails to capture some of the diverse logics and practices within multicultural youth sociality. Reconciling dichotomous conceptual frames that position young people as moving back-and-forth between forms of exclusion and openness, I propose an alternative frame – a perverse form of everyday cosmopolitanism – through which to consider young people's intercultural relations. To do this, I draw on young people's conversations about sex, dating and desire as an entry point for new theorising about racism. Race and ethnicity were cornerstones of students' frequent discussions about sexual 'tastes' and activity, discourses that have racist histories and effects. However, students did not understand their social world in such terms. These students' social practices offer a situated illustration of how racism can function as part of a more inclusive cosmopolitan ethos in young lives, which I term 'perverse cosmopolitanism'.

*Keywords:* cosmopolitanism; conviviality; racism; youth; ethnography; sexuality

## Introduction

How we live in a 'Land of Strangers' continues to be a high stakes question (Amin 2013). Understanding the dynamics of racism and conviviality in multicultural places has taken on particular significance in the current global socio-political climate where discourse centres on diversity as a danger to social harmony and cohesion (Glick Schiller and Schmidt 2015). Caught within this discourse, young people, and schools as 'micropublics' (Amin 2002), are often scrutinised as indicators of a multicultural society's health. Representations of young people leading the way on grassroots intercultural initiatives clash against images of youth at the frontline of racialised antagonisms on streets and in schools (Butcher and Harris 2010; Costello 2016). Enforced proximity in a culturally diverse school may offer young people 'important possibilities for cultural experimentation' (Beck 2008, 31) or rouse tensions, conflict and divisions. Joining scholars working at the intersections of youth studies and everyday multiculturalism (e.g. Harris 2013; Clayton 2009; Noble 2009; Back 1996), in this article I seek to better understand these contradictory possibilities, focusing on how young people talk about sex, dating and desire at a culturally diverse secondary college in Melbourne, Australia.

During my year-long ethnographic fieldwork at this school, I was often troubled and dismayed by students' 'casual' conversations about sexual desire and the ethno-racial background of sexual partners.<sup>1</sup> Their dating preferences were inflected with stereotypical understandings of racialised Others that have racist histories; wider issues of 'sexual racism' informing dating preferences (Callander, Newman, and Holt 2015), power relations inherent to ranking bodies by desirability and colonial legacies of fear and desire were all activated when interpreting these students' behaviour. Yet, the onus is on the ethnographer to respect the emic experience. These young people did not understand their racialising discourses as racist. Why might this be the case? To address this question, this article spotlights sexualised discussions in youth multiculturalism as a significant entry point to theorising about racism in young lives.

The school I call Greendale High is situated in a historically working-class outer suburb of Melbourne – a heartland of current social anxieties about youth, multiculturalism and divisive population growth. While tourist brochures, government websites and cultural institutions laud Melbourne as a multicultural metropolis 'home to one of the world's most harmonious and culturally diverse communities' (City of Melbourne 2017), these narratives often position social cohesion as an achievement easily undone by too much, the wrong kind or ill-managed cultural diversity.<sup>2</sup> These fears gather in particular around the outer suburban fringes of Melbourne, home to some of the fastest growing, most culturally diverse and most disadvantaged municipalities. Recently (and episodically) young people in growth areas like Greendale have been subject to scrutiny over social cohesion along with media anxieties about 'teenage terrorists' and 'ethnic' youth gangs (e.g. Lillebuen 2014; Bolt 2016). Through focusing on racialised and sexualised social relations at Greendale High, this paper explores whether their practices call for antiracist intervention, as current media coverage might suggest, or whether there is evidence of transformative ways of living with difference which unsettle and complicate current understandings of racism and conviviality.

Whilst the first half of this article critically examines the racist logics that may have informed students' sexualised discussions, this reading of racism did not accord with how students understood their social world. In fact, one group of friends, hailing from Afghanistan, Morocco and Malta, concurred: racism doesn't exist anymore because 'white girls want to have sex with black guys'. Seemingly, from their viewpoint, if one is willing to get intimate with a person considered Other, it signals an all-embracing openness to and engagement with difference that does not reconcile easily with racism. As Connolly argues, it is critical to closely attend to youth perspectives to 'more fully understand the nature of racism in their lives and develop and adopt more informed and appropriate strategies in order to counter it' (2002, 195). By taking seriously Greendale students' perspectives, in the second half of this article I question whether standard readings of students' behaviour as racist capture the complexity of young people's racialised practices and logics, which were based on inclusive orientations to and intimate investments in cultural diversity. Through these two readings I highlight not only the problematic ethno-racial logics embedded within youth discussions of sexual desire and activity, but also the need to expand the range of conceptual tools and terms available to capture and address the sophisticated social practices and ideas that shaped multicultural youth sociality. Reconciling the frames of 'racism' and 'conviviality' (or 'everyday cosmopolitanism') that much literature on youth multiculturalism treats as dichotomous, I propose 'perverse cosmopolitanism' as an alternative frame through which to consider young people's intercultural relations.

### ***Racism and Conviviality in Everyday Multiculture***

Before turning to the central debates to which 'perverse cosmopolitanism' contributes, I will first outline this article's guiding normative definitions of racism and conviviality/cosmopolitanism, which are challenged by youth mobilisations of these concepts. Reviewing the literature on racism, Berman and Paradies (2010, 217) assert that racism is variously comprised of 'stereotypes (racist beliefs), prejudice (racist emotions/affect) or discrimination (racist behaviours and practices).' In particular, 'everyday racism', according to Essed, refers to 'systematic, recurrent, familiar practices' that have cumulative effects, fortifying, normalising and embedding racist ideas and boundaries (1991, 3). In regards to discourse specifically, this paper discusses racism in terms of everyday talk that 'has the effect of establishing, sustaining and reinforcing oppressive power relations' (Wetherell and Potter 1992, 70), whether (inter)related to race, ethnicity, religion, language or culture (see Grigg and Manderson 2015). In contrast, the conceptual terms 'conviviality' and 'cosmopolitanism' centre on 'getting along'. Whilst 'conviviality' is an expansive conceptual tool that encompasses social relations with particularly positive affects along with the 'practice, effort, negotiation and achievement' of living together (Wise and Noble 2016, 425), in this article I preference 'everyday cosmopolitanism' in the development of the concept 'perverse cosmopolitanism' for its particular foregrounding of an openness and willingness to engage with perceived differences (Plage et al. 2016).

Informed by its normative counterpart that Hannerz describes as 'an intellectual and esthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences' (1996, 103), everyday cosmopolitanism privileges non-elite, non-optimal and commonplace modes of engagement with diversity. Everyday cosmopolitanism goes by many names; 'ordinary' (e.g. Lamont and Aksartova 2002), 'vernacular' (e.g. Werbner 2006) and 'rooted' (e.g. Appiah 1997) cosmopolitanism are just some of the terms that describe and analyse the 'strategies used by ordinary people to

bridge boundaries with people who are different from them' (Lamont and Aksartova 2002, 1). Drawing on botanical metaphors, 'rooted' cosmopolitanism advances an understanding of cosmopolitanism *in situ* as a 'grassroots' practice that may be grounded in the local. Applied to cultural practices more broadly, to root or be rooted is to 'establish deeply and firmly'.<sup>3</sup>

Intriguingly, in an Australian slang vernacular, 'root' means to have sexual intercourse in both noun and verb form.<sup>4</sup> In the past tense, it can also take on connotations of an object, situation or state that is considered 'fucked' – broken, exhausted, seriously drunk or having gone badly.<sup>5</sup> These meanings suggest some useful inflections for developing a more complex concept of everyday cosmopolitanism for youth sociality. Firstly, the relevance of sex and sexuality comes to the fore; these are important elements of young people's social worlds. By overlooking the sexual aspect of youth multiculturalism, we fail to give due attention to the potentially transformative, agentic and creative ways in which young people are dealing with complex intercultural sociality. Failing to recognise this also risks overlooking the co-production of potentially troubling ethno-racial ideas (and their entangled bedfellows – gender and sexuality) that lie embedded in this sexual terrain. Whilst the link between racism and sexuality has been a long-standing concern of scholars in the field of 'race relations', whiteness, (post)colonialism and multiculturalism (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Benson 1988; Hall 1988; Frankenberg 1993), my aim here is to contribute to the debates in multicultural youth studies on how young people negotiate lived multiculturalism (see Wise and Veluyathum 2009), taking into account the entangled ways ethnicity, gender and sexuality structure social relations in youth cultures (Harris and Herron 2017).

Secondly, the Australian meaning of 'rooted' points to how everyday cosmopolitanism can be 'fucked' – fraught with risk and practised in problematic ways. This latter point builds on current research findings and framings by scholars exploring everyday multiculturalism in local geographies. Ethnographically oriented research has revealed how conflict and racism can co-exist relatively easily with acceptance of and openness towards others within everyday sociality (Wise 2005; Wessendorf 2014). These findings unsettle foundational principles of the social cohesion agenda, providing evidence that conflict can exist without fracturing school communities and producing sensationalist, panicked and exclusionary outcomes (Noble 2009; Harris 2013; Thomas 2011). Valuably, research has further shown that young people ricochet between performances of both everyday cosmopolitanism and everyday racism (Clayton 2009; Harris 2013). Shifting, contrary performances are not simply contradictions; scholars suggest these (and other) shifting performances are best explained in terms of competing dispositions, discourses and repertoires for young people that are strategic and positional (Nayak 1999; Harris 2015; see also Wise 2005). By positing that young people move back-and-forth between forms of everyday racism and more convivial relations, this body of research has been particularly significant in providing analyses that reckons with both openness and exclusion, moving beyond single framings that (inadvertently) represent young people in either a positive, progressive light or negative, racist light. Despite these theoretical advancements, current framings continue to draw on dichotomous concepts, namely, that racism is diametrically opposed to conviviality and everyday cosmopolitanism.

Even the most recent attention to the paradoxical relationship between racism and conviviality in everyday multiculturalism reproduces this binary. Tyler (2016, my emphasis), for instance, writes about 'the *close proximity* of racist and convivial relations' in suburban

Britain, while for Wessendorf (2016, 460) modes of racism ‘exist in parallel’ to more positive sociabilities in Hackney, London. In the case of Greendale students and their dating lives, this framing undermines the sophistication and complexity of their discourses and practices; they were not simply shifting between racist, exclusionary behaviour and openness and inclusivity. An alternative frame is required, one that reconciles these dichotomies, to capture the complex logics of young people’s culturally diverse social world. While scholars reviewing these debates have noted the possibility of more ‘intertwined’ (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014) or ‘enmeshed’ (Wise and Noble 2016) articulations of conviviality and racism, according to Back and Sinha (2016), these have not been elaborated empirically or with theoretical depth. Greendale students’ sexualising and racialising practices offer a situated illustration of how racism can function precariously as part of a more inclusive cosmopolitan ethos in young lives: ‘perverse cosmopolitanism’.

### **Research Context and Methods**

This article draws on ethnographic data I collected while studying young people's negotiations of peer sociality at a culturally diverse high school. In 2014, I spent approximately four school days per week at Greendale High during the school terms. Greendale is a large, co-educational government school attended by a mix of Aboriginal and Anglo-Australians, first- and second-generation Australians, along with new migrants and refugees. Approximately half of the students had a language background other than English with over 40 language groups represented. To protect the students’ anonymity, the school and all students have been assigned pseudonyms and identifying demographic information has been withheld.

The data derives from detailed fieldnotes collected through immersive participant observation and interactions (see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995) at Greendale with 16-19 year-old students I came to know through attending their humanities classes, spending time in the schoolyard and at a local cafe that some students frequented after school. In addition to ethical clearance from the university and the Department of Education, students and their parents (for students under 18 years old) signed consent forms to participate in my research. Through repeated readings of fieldnotes, data was manually coded and analysed thematically (see ORielly 2009; Madden 2010). Tracing how racialising discourses and practices manifested in peer sociality, multiple themes emerged consistently, compelling sustained analytical attention (see also Wetherell and Potter 1992). One key theme was racialised discourse about sex, dating and desire – the focus of this article. Whilst the ethnographic vignettes detailed here relate to a handful of students involved in conversations about sexual interest, these patterns are also reflected in the wider data set. My own experiences of being immersed within a sexualised, racialised social world are included where relevant and are a point of reflexive discussion and theorisation in keeping with ethnographic conventions (Hastrup and Hervik 1994).

So as not to impose my own terminology or understandings of cultural diversity and racism on Greendale students, or dictate what was salient and meaningful in student life, I made a purposeful decision to allow the students to direct the conversation. This mirrors strategies employed by other scholars studying race in schools (Pollock 2004; Bucholtz 2011). Such an ethnographic approach to peer sociality facilitates a grounded understanding of youth

interculturality; it does not presume the significance of racialisation in young lives and need not prescribe the language used to describe young people's experiences. Ethnography is particularly valuable for interrogating labels like 'racist'. According to Bucholtz, ethnography is able to illuminate the local contextual production of racialised practices and discourses instead of 'dismissing speakers as "racists" without seeking to make sense of their viewpoints' (2011, 400). It should be noted that the interpretations offered here are based on how young people talked about their racialised dating lives, not their actual practices. Whether or not sexual choices are indicative of racist beliefs or are influenced by other factors is beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, students' provocative talk is illuminating; the material students drew on to achieve their performative ends reveals much about the logics that circulated in a youthful culturally diverse sociality.

### **Discourses of Sex, Dating and Desire**

Talking about racialised sex, sexual desire and dating practices was a significant part of how students navigated everyday social life at Greendale High. In the schoolyard, one of the most common conversation starters or fillers among students was 'what nash are you into?' (sexually). The other version of this was: 'do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend?', then, 'what nash are they?' 'Nash', derived from 'nationality', referred to ethnic background since the majority of students at Greendale High were Australian born or Australian citizens. (Heterosexual) intercultural dating was normalised to the point that racialised interest in potential partners was assumed (cf. Thomas 2011). The following schoolyard vignette indicates the kind of conversations about sex, dating and desire I heard regularly between friends of diverse backgrounds during school breaks.

As we filed out of the classroom door after class one morning, Bec (Anglo-Australian) was waiting for Milena (Maltese background) and me (Anglo-Australian). The student teacher, a young woman of European and Asian descent, came over and joined our conversation. 'What nash are you into?', Bec asked her conversationally. She said that she had a boyfriend, indicating that the question was not relevant. I turned the question back onto Bec.

'White,' she said matter-of-factly, 'actually, I want a New Zealand boyfriend.'  
'They are gorillas,' Milena remarked, 'they'll squash you...you know when...get a Sudo [Sudanese].'

Spotting a tradesman up on a ladder repairing a school building, I asked Milena and Bec: 'What do we think of that guy?'

'Too white,' Milena labelled succinctly.

To my eyes his ethnicity was ambiguous and so I clarified: 'Is he white?'

'He is to me!' Milena said with a laugh.

'But you're getting whiter!' Bec teased, referring to Milena's diminishing summer tan.

'That's true,' she acknowledged, inspecting her olive-skinned arms.

The ranking of ethnic groups by 'hotness' was also a common conversation topic. As I sat down at one of the tables in an English as Another Language class, I realised that three boys from Afghani backgrounds were in the midst of discussing which girls of what 'nash' were hot. One of them stated: 'Sri Lankan girls are better looking than Indian girls, don't you

think?’ He looked at me for a response. ‘I think that’s mean,’ I replied. He continued as if I’d said nothing or agreed with him – ‘Sri Lankan women are hotter. Just like South Koreans are hotter than Chinese, you know. And Japanese are also hotter than Chinese.’ These kinds of comparisons were echoed during a free period I spent with Gamze, of Turkish descent, and her friends (from Eastern European and South Asian backgrounds). ‘Do you like white guys or both?’ Gamze asked me. I evaded the question. ‘I don’t find black guys attractive,’ she stated. We then talked about the rumour going around that a student teacher quit because she found some of the Afghani male students sexually threatening. ‘I find them scary,’ Gamze said. One lunchtime later in the week, discussion between Gamze’s group of friends centred on hot guys on the bus and then creepy, sleazy guys. Two girls claimed that ‘foreign guys’ and ‘Muslim guys’ were the sleaziest but another friend argued that ‘fresh Indians’ were even worse. A student of Jewish heritage, Jase, also complained about ‘old Arab guys’ being interested in him on gay dating apps.

In another conversation after class one day, Emily, a blue-eyed, blonde-haired student, told me how she felt that people gave her and her Sudanese boyfriend strange looks when they were out in public together. She described how people at her previous school questioned why she would go out with a black guy, rationalising that ‘it wasn’t multicultural there’. ‘What about at Greendale?’ I asked. ‘Nah, it doesn’t happen here,’ she replied, ‘although people do think “I like black guys” but I’m like just because I’m going out with one black guy doesn’t mean I like all black guys.’ She looked perplexed.

These ethnographic moments exemplify the ways that discussions of sex, dating and desire were invariably racialised among Greendale students. It is not the kind of treatment of racialised bodies often discussed in accounts of everyday racism – the violent burning of Bangladeshi women’s hair (Nayak 2017), or racist slurs of ‘smelly’ and ‘dirty’ hurled at Indian bodies (Velayutham 2009); violent or antagonistic racialised conflict was a very rare occurrence at Greendale High. Rather, students produced a racialising discourse that talked about and positioned people in sexualising and stereotyped ways that valued and devalued certain racialised, gendered bodies. While on some level unremarkable, for these students intercultural intimacies and interests were at once a source of entertaining conversation and meaningful social knowledge or performance. What these ethnographic vignettes elucidate is that students’ provocative talk drew on the language of sexual ‘taste’, the comparison and ranking of bodies, and the use of social rewards and sanctions to police students’ social practices. Black, Indian, Muslim and Afghani male bodies were subject to particular scrutiny. The following section considers these key social practices and the possible racist associations, logics and tenors that produced or informed them. I then turn to explore an alternative reading of students’ racialising behaviour.

## **The Racist Backdrop**

### ***The Language of Preference and Taste***

The term ‘sexual racism’ is gaining traction in the media and scholarly research to describe racial online dating preferences (Callander, Newman, and Holt 2015; Allen 2015). According to Allen (2015), while gay men’s online dating profiles might read ‘no blacks’ or ‘no Asians’, racism is denied and behaviour explained in the language of ‘preference’. Dating profiles may also draw on food metaphors to advertise sexual (dis)tastes; ‘no rice’ or ‘no curry’, for

instance, tell Asian and Indian men respectively ‘they don’t have a shot’ (Allen 2015). When questioned about racialised sexual preferences on dating websites, gay, male participants in Robinson’s research told him that ‘it doesn’t mean anything’ (2015, 323). Greendale students also seemingly understood their conversations about racialised ‘tastes’ as unproblematic, not associated with circulating scripts that ‘provide us with seemingly natural sexual preferences for some partners and intuitive aversions to others’ (Nagel 2006, 545; see also Bourdieu for wider critique of ‘taste’). Their discussions sounded like casual, amiable food-related conversations: do you prefer Chinese food or Korean food? Do you like Indian or Sri Lankan cuisine better? I like Japanese food, but I’m not a big fan of African dishes (cf. hooks 1992 on ‘shopping’ for sexual partners). Yet such comparative discussions of sexual interests have a distinct ‘boutique multiculturalism’ (Fish 1997) flavour to them, marked by the celebration of diverse foods and festivals and the exoticism and commodification of the Other. In this racialised and sexualised commodity culture, bell hooks argues that ‘ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’ (1992, 21). For hooks, what is concealed beneath this cosmopolitan veneer is the power and privilege implicated in ‘eating the Other’. While in the context of Greendale High students from a diverse range of backgrounds participated in these discussions of racialised ‘taste’, they were not immune to the workings of power that structure racism in society more broadly. However, they mobilised concepts of cultural difference and power in ways that made sense within their peer sociality, creating contextual, shifting racialised hierarchies and fluid criteria for (de)valuing and policing peer practices.

### ***Racial Rankings: Social Cachet and Stigma***

Amongst Greendale students, sexual conversations centred on which ‘nash’ you usually dated or found most sexually attractive. However, these discussions invariably led to rejecting certain racialised groups as less sexually attractive or desirous. Thus, a socially negotiated hierarchy emerged from this discursive practice, based on interlaced ideas of ethnicity, race, sexuality and gender. Focusing here on the young women’s conversations, Indian men and men variously termed ‘Afghani’, ‘Arab’ or ‘Muslim’ typically ranked lowest in what was a partial and variable hierarchy of desire. The desirability of black men was, by contrast, much more unstable; students evaluated black bodies in both ‘positive’ and negative ways (as will be discussed in detail later).

The ranking of racialised bodies by ‘hotness’ rewarded some kinds of ‘diversity’ with social cachet and stigmatised others. In one comparative ranking, Sri Lankans were valued for being hotter than Indians, with Indians facing additional stigma for associations with ‘fresh’ or new immigrants, inferring that their cultural difference pushed the limits of acceptability and desirability. Students who mentioned Indian boyfriends or sexual interests were often subject to teasing by school friends. Similarly, Bec who had a crush on an Afghani student felt compelled to make claims like ‘he doesn’t look Afghani though!’ when Milena teased her about it. These conversations are performances as students attempted to position themselves in peer sociality, while simultaneously positioning peers and being positioned themselves. Claims about ‘which nash’ students would or would not date were highly useful as a resource for reputational work. To manage this successfully they had to learn and navigate the ethno-racial scripts about sexually desirable, but more importantly, sexually undesirable Others.



What then were the likely ethno-racial logics that informed shared understandings at Greendale High about Indian, Muslim/Afghani and black men?

Circulating discourse about South Asian men across Australia and the UK paint them as effeminate, soft-bodied and physically vulnerable alongside a number of other stereotypes (see Lim 2012; Connolly 2002). In the context of Greendale, evaluations of Indian men seemed to shift between competing notions of asexuality and sleaziness. For South Asian men who are Muslim, masculine and sexual associations can take a strikingly different form (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2014). In the Australian context, research suggests that young Muslim men's sexuality is viewed as aggressive, misogynist and animalistic (see Poynting et al 2004). According to Harris, while many young Muslim men participate in hegemonic youth cultural practices like drinking, sex and making sexual comments about women's bodies, for young Australians in her research it was 'not enough to grant [them] membership in the sexist fraternity of young Australian men entitled to judge women' (2013, 78). While she is referring to the policing of acceptable masculinities by male peers, at Greendale High young women were also a core part of this policing; Gamze and others deemed these kinds of hegemonic youth practices 'scary' when performed by Muslim Afghani peers.

In all these schoolyard discussions, discourses about dating and desire as well as concerns about sexual harassment, marked distinctions between racialised groups in language that was generalising and Othering. However, slight differences in language were revealing. Students commonly referred to male students of Middle Eastern, Muslim backgrounds as 'the Afghani boys', while black students were spoken about as 'black guys.' By comparison, the former category is familiarised (perhaps endearingly) but emasculated, while the latter is viewed as more masculine but also as more abstract and unknown. The way students talked about young black men it was often hard to believe they were talking about fellow students, lovers, friends and acquaintances at all.

### ***Black Bodies & Social Sanctions***

One lunchtime in the schoolyard, Milena, Bec and three of their male friends hailing from Afghanistan were debriefing on a party they attended that weekend. Apparently, Milena met a 'Sudo' guy there and they were now officially dating. Milena teased Bec about boys at the party who wanted to 'hook up' with Bec. 'I don't *do* black guys. Why don't they get that?' Bec vented in apparent frustration. In a calmer manner, she added: 'there are only three black guys I like'. Conversation moved on to planning Milena's next party. While Milena and the boys discussed arrangements, Bec filled me in on the last party that she had hosted. She declared it a resounding success: 'it was awesome. Everybody said so.' As if to further prove this claim, she added 'there were only four black people. The rest of us were...'—she hesitated, seemingly unsure as to how to describe the skin colour of her Afghani friends at the table — '...darker-skinned and white,' she finished.

Spoken about in depersonalising terms, Bec drew on a common discourse at Greendale High that linked young black men with (cool/uncool) deviant behaviour, like starting fights and theft at parties. For Bec, socially acceptable and sexually desirable black male peers were the exception to the rule. Milena, in contrast, expressed familiarity and comfort with black male

bodies. This rendered her a spokesperson for the black Other. A common question, both as a nod to the trope and as a curious enquiry about the factual nature of the stereotype, posed to those known to have sex with black guys was: ‘does he have the BBC?’ ‘What does that mean?’ I asked upon first hearing. ‘Big, black cock!’ a group of friends sang gleefully in chorus. One such conversation took place among Milena’s friends one Monday morning at recess. Milena was complaining about how a friend ‘cockblocked’ her with ‘a black guy’ over the weekend. ‘Which guy?’ I asked. ‘There is only one hot black guy at Greendale,’ she replied. One of their friends asked curiously whether it is true that black men have ‘big dicks’. Milena nodded, knowledgeably.

This was typical of the way Greendale students drew on well-worn stereotypes without reference to their racist implications. In Back’s (1996) study of youth multiculturalism in London young black men and women were also subjected to stereotyped sexualisation, differentiated by gender. Young black men were characterised as having large penises, while young black women were considered to have large sexual appetites and powers. Back explains that these discourses reveal how ideas of black masculinity are constructed in terms of ‘aggressiveness and sexual potency’, while black femininity is conceived in terms of fertility and bodily abundance (1996, 178). According to Benson, white English representations of blackness – sexuality and brutality – are a legacy of early colonial contact with Africa (1981, 5). This idea of aggressiveness and hypersexuality can easily be turned into fear of the black male Other. Bucholtz explains in the case of her American-based school research that black male peers were identified as both ‘admirably powerful yet alarmingly dangerous’ by white students (2011, 399).

Informed by these popular and pervasive logics, ‘black and white’ or ‘black and non-black’ sexual intimacy was marked out from other constellations of intercultural dating at Greendale High. This attention and accompanying discourse suggests that relationships with black peers violated norms, challenging socially sanctioned gender, sexuality and cultural practices and identities (see also Harris 2015). For instance, jokes abounded about interactions between black and white students, sexualised by their friends for effect. A hug between these students, for instance, might incur a joke about ‘interracial porn’ (as one student quipped). In other moments, a number of female students of diverse backgrounds praised their alleged sexual objectification by black young men; overt sexual behaviour made black men ‘real’ (and therefore cool) according to stereotypical representations of blackness in youth culture. Milena, however, bore the brunt of hypersexualised notions of blackness. Sitting in a circle of smokers on the oval one lunchtime, students discussed a dramatic friendship fallout that had happened at a party over the weekend. ‘Milena’s party?’ I asked, wondering who they were talking about. A smoker asked the circle of mostly white students who she was. One of the boys said that she was a slut who only sleeps with black guys. ‘Is that a bad thing?’ I asked. ‘I’m not being racist, but she only sleeps with Sudos and Afghanis,’ he explained. This contrasts to other circles where Milena gained cachet and status for her sexual relations with exciting, potentially dangerous black bodies.

Emily, in a long-term relationship with her Sudanese boyfriend, escaped this ‘slut’ label. As Emily explained, Greendale High was an unusual haven from judgemental eyes regarding her relationship with a young black man. Nevertheless, this relationship cast Emily in the school social order as having a particular preference for black men. This social discourse acted to position both her boyfriend (black man) and her (white woman) in limiting and value-laden

categories. In the case of both Emily and Milena, peer reactions revealed that their behaviour was something that needed to be explained because it was perceived as aberrant. For Milena, her dating and sex life was used against her, to put her down for her sexual proclivities for 'Sudos' and 'Afghanis' which apparently said something about her character and moral fibre (cf. Frankenberg 1993). At Greendale High, to sleep around labelled young women as on one level of slut, but to sleep with Sudanese and Afghani boys was on a whole other level of sluttiness. Thus, peer judgments further expose a hierarchy of 'sluttiness' at school articulated with an ethno-racial hierarchy, which is placed onto female bodies.

These complex sexualised, gendered and racialised social configurations and modes of policing reveal prevalent logics that can be read as racist. Provocative claims to racialised 'tastes' have exclusionary, homogenising and exoticising qualities. The devaluing of Indian, Afghani and Muslim male bodies and the fetishistic essentialism of black peers were also likely informed by widely circulating racist and gendered ideas. Yet Greendale students continually claimed that racism was not an issue at their school. Of course, they may simply have been unaware of how popular racisms and hegemonic gender and sexual norms pervaded school life and shaped youth culture. As Stratton argues, problematic ethno-racial ideas may be so engrained and normalised in Australian culture that people 'don't even recognise themselves as making decisions based in a racialised history' (2006, 662). Yet the claims by these students that racism no longer applies because of intercultural sex and sexual interest resists a single reading of students' schoolyard behaviour. In taking the emic seriously, do these analyses about the racist backdrop of their social world do justice to Greendale students' negotiations of a culturally diverse sociality? How easy or productive is it to label people and practices as racist? Other incidents in the field brought to the fore the relevance of these kinds of questions. The following section brings into discussion further examples of students' sociabilities to critically explore the possibility of an alternative framing of students' behaviour beyond that of 'racism'.

### **Returning to the Emic: is it racist?**

After school one afternoon, Jase (white Australian of Jewish heritage), Aleksandra (Georgian-Turkish-Czech background) and I went to smoke shisha. Sprawled on a Persian carpet, we gossiped about school and social life over a large, shared shisha pipe. This was briefly interrupted when my boyfriend called. After getting off the phone, I told Aleksandra and Jase about him. 'We'd better be invited to the wedding!' they laughed. I told them that it would be a pretty interesting wedding – not your run-of-the-mill white wedding – because he is a practising Sikh Indian.

'Ohhh', Aleksandra said as if realising something, 'are you into Indian guys?'

'I'm into *this* Indian guy,' I replied, purposefully rejecting the school-wide discourse.

'Does he talk like this?' Aleksandra asked in a stereotypical Indian accent with accompanying head wobble.

*Racist!* I thought to myself, as I laughed along with the others.

A few rounds of the shisha pipe later, she asked, head bobbing again, 'does your boyfriend listen to this music?'

*What a racist!* I thought to myself again. *This is not Hindi/Punjabi Music, it's clearly Arabic*, I reasoned silently – we were, after all, in an Arabic shisha lounge with a Middle-Eastern owner. Before we left, Aleksandra decided to prank call a friend of

hers, putting on the same thick Indian accent and pretending to be from a call-centre. Jase followed suit, calling another friend while attempting a vaguely middle-eastern accent. As soon as we parted ways I called my boyfriend and recounted, dumbfounded, the kinds of comments that were made about him. ‘...*AND* it wasn’t even “Indian” music!’ I ended emphatically. ‘Well, actually it *was* Hindi music,’ he informed me – he had heard it over the phone. I was wrong. Aleksandra was right – about the music, at least.

Despite my willingness and swiftness in labelling Aleksandra’s comments and behaviour as racist at the time, this was troubled in face of more knowledge. I later learnt that Aleksandra had an Indian boyfriend herself. She had never mentioned his ethnicity in my presence; the information about him that was usually deemed salient was whether he was treating her ‘right’ and about their sex life. This is suggestive that her comments were tongue-in-cheek or ironic and authorised by subtle ideas about who has the right to say things marred with racist risk. The logic might run that because she has an Indian boyfriend she is clearly not racist towards Indian people and is, therefore, at liberty to joke about and perpetuate stereotypes to serve the interests of repartee – making it more ‘interesting’ and humorous. This kind of thinking and shared agreement might extend to people who are friends with or friendly with people from backgrounds burdened with stereotypes and prejudices. Perhaps, in a culturally diverse sociality where engaging with friends, peers and lovers from different backgrounds was a banal part of everyday life, an idea of the ‘post-racial’ had also emerged. Jase often made targeted ethno-racial jokes towards his friends as part of showing how ironic, subversive and progressive he was. He told me his remarks – for instance calling his South Asian friend a taxi driver – only ‘*sounded* racist’. Within a post-racial frame, racist stereotypes ‘seemed valid for humorous use because given the assumed *unacceptability* of racism, the images have been stripped of their racializing power’ (Titley 2016, my emphasis).

Aleksandra’s jokes towards me may also have been intended as form of cosmopolitan bonding; a charged in-joke between two women who share a certain life experience of intercultural dating, navigating cultural differences at an intimate level and being personally privy to the kinds of racism our partners face. My own motivation to exoticise an Indian wedding further suggests that a kind of cosmopolitan cachet accompanied this discussion of culturally ‘different’ boyfriends. Aleksandra’s and my interactional motivations unsettle easy divisions of appropriate and inappropriate in terms of what kind of commentary is acceptable fodder for developing rapport and intimacy. Interestingly, most conversations about racialised desire I participated in were used to, or resulted in, bonding and inclusion among peers by finding common ground or a common reference point. The student teacher, mentioned earlier, and I, an adult researcher, were included in students’ social lives through this social discourse; talk about racialised sexual preferences was used for entertaining, boredom-relieving and inclusive ends, rather than as a way to exclude and offend (if we focus on intent and not outcome, as students tended to do).

The issue with the Hindi music also complicated simple labelling of stereotypes and racism. If Aleksandra did indeed know the music was Hindi, and this was not a lucky guess, her selection of stereotypes was informed by a ‘fund of cosmopolitan knowledge’ (Kromidas 2011, 86) that was more sophisticated than my own. Even when Greendale students used such intercultural awareness to tease their friends in ways that had the capacity to annoy and offend, this ability is nevertheless indicative of a certain level of closeness with culturally

diverse peers (see Harris and Herron 2017). It certainly made me question: if I was wrong about this, what else have I been wrong about?

Considering racialising conversations amidst other practices in the broader flow of school life also paints a more complex picture. Students' repartee gives a much stronger impression of racism than when taking into account their less risqué moments of socialising in the schoolyard and their actual practices of mixing, including sexual encounters. While Bec was complicit in stigmatising Afghani attractiveness and acceptability, she 'hooked up' with young men of this background at parties. Milena frequently policed racialised, sexual boundaries and drew on black stereotypes at the same time that she was working through culturally diverse sociality in more nuanced ways; she had a mixed-race baby from an interracial relationship and socialised with her large group of black and Afghani friends on the weekends. She was *doing* everyday cosmopolitanism: intimately crossing and dissolving racialised boundaries. This calls for, and students deserve, a re-reading of dating and desire discourses and other social behaviours beyond that of disembedding racist logic. A lens of racism does not sufficiently account for students' perspectives and practices; students were not simply moving between racist and convivial exchanges. Rather, these young people had extended the possibilities of the appropriate and convivial within their social world.

Informed by a whole host of complex factors, 'racism' may operate in Greendale peer sociality as a form of 'perverse cosmopolitanism' – a 'rooted' (in the Australian sense) or 'fucked' (sexual as well as problematic) cosmopolitanism – that encompasses sexual intercultural intimacies and everyday engagement with difference embedded with risk, tension and problematic ethno-racial logics. This concept captures how young people's troubling racialising discourses may be enacted from a position of inclusivity and openness to difference, at times drawing on intimate knowledge of culturally diverse peers. To respect the emic here is not to deny that students' discourses had real power to wound and perpetuate damaging prejudices and inequalities. Students' disavowal of racism, or lack of concern about it, does not of course mean that racism did not exist. Irrespective of students' social norms, it is clear that sexualised, gendered racisms towards Indian, Muslim and black people that circulate in and structure Australian society, were influential in young lives. The concept of 'perverse cosmopolitanism' addresses the need for alternative conceptual resources to better capture the complex ways in which racialisation operated in and was understood by young people invested in a multicultural social space. Young people's social relations were much more complex than the dichotomous framing of 'racism' and 'conviviality' allows.

## **Conclusion**

This article has put young people's frequent conversations about racialised sexual preferences and activity in the spotlight: sexual discourses and intimacies were a significant part of how Greendale High students negotiated social relations in conditions of cultural diversity in ways that may reveal productive engagements with difference as well as the perpetuation of deeply embedded, problematic ideas with racist histories and effects. As part of negotiating social life at school, students from diverse backgrounds drew on ethno-racial categories and stereotyped characteristics and used these categories to police and revere peers' sexual interests and practices. The social constellations they produced were highly complex, but were worked through in unremarkable, non-conflictual ways. These students regularly

demonstrated commitment to inclusive interculturality and cosmopolitan capabilities to navigate a culturally diverse peer-oriented environment structured by youth codes and hierarchies regarding ethnicity, gender and sexuality.

It is through taking seriously the ways young people orient to their social world at school that we can come to understand the contextual meaning and mobilisation of racism and conviviality in a multicultural place and how racialisation with racist connotations might exist within a social world where racism is denied or downplayed. This article does not conclusively identify what is and is not racist or appropriate for how young people navigate multicultural school life; indeed it underscores the difficulties of such interpretations. Instead, in the context of conversations about sex and desire, it illuminates how expressions of everyday racism and cosmopolitanism can be enmeshed and co-produced in relational, dynamic ways that are more complex and sophisticated than the binary construction of racism/conviviality is able to capture. I have proposed 'perverse cosmopolitanism' as a conceptual frame to reconcile these modes of relationality; Greendale students did not simply move between forms of exclusion and openness, rather these practices were utterly entangled as they worked out ways to co-exist in a shared space. Notions of what was respectful and appropriate behaviour were likely shifting through this negotiation of togetherness, changing the state of play. Engaging with peers in enforced proximity 'beyond respectful, arm's-length regard for difference' (Harris 2013, 47) generated intimate intercultural knowledge, delicate means of gaining social status and ways to fuel repartee and rapport. A perverse form of everyday cosmopolitanism highlights how this engagement with difference could be inflected with risk of offending, marred by troubling discourse, and formed by youth experimentation with social positioning and ways of being in a culturally diverse sociality.

The animation of problematic racialised, gendered logics at Greendale could have had negative pedagogical effects. Students may have been implicitly learning, normalising and transmitting ideas and behaviours with discriminatory, inferiorising and othering impacts. However, what this article demonstrates is that labelling something as racist so as to mount an educational, social or sociological attack on it, may not provide scholars or educators with effective ways to unveil and address such subtle, embedded and 'convivial' forms of racialisation – particularly if students do not recognise their social practices and interactional intentions as 'racist'. In a peer sociality that is intimately invested in diversity and motivated by a 'perverse' cosmopolitan ethos, the anti-racist rationale that 'you've got to teach people that racism is wrong and then they won't be racist' (Bryan 2012, 611) will likely fall on deaf ears. To effect change, scholarly research, along with youth policies and programs, needs to understand the new rules in new times and to use language and concepts that speak to young people's contemporary lived experience.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The term 'ethno-racial' is intended to signal the shifting and conflated ways in which young people racialised their social world and peers. At Greendale High, ideas of 'nash' (nationality), 'race' and 'ethnicity' were used in fluid ways and these modes of social categorisation were ever-shifting.

<sup>2</sup> In the broader Australian context, as the Australian Human Rights Commission website explains (as of 2015), '[c]ompared to other countries, Australia has a remarkable degree of social cohesion given its diversity. However, maintaining this cohesion can be a challenge'.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/root>, accessed 19 Oct 2015

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=rooted>, accessed 19 Oct 2015

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