Your Work Is Not International Relations

Amal Abu-Bakare

Abstract
This is an eight-page reflection piece on gatekeeping in IR knowledge production and the politics that goes into presenting national racial contestations as issues unworthy of international study and consideration. Premised on a personal experience of scholastic rejection, this commentary is a reflective intervention concerning the state of the field and the imperial connotations of methodological disciplinarity – the process in which IR research is restricted within disciplinary borders because of scholastic endeavours to keep the discipline pure. Here, using anti-imperial thought, I press for deeper consideration and re-evaluation of how academics come to decide which experiences of the world should be deemed worthy of global recognition and where the boundaries of IR should come to an end.

Keywords
intervention, reparative scholarship, racialisation, international relations, counterterrorism

In a recent rejection letter obtained from a journal of international politics, I received the following comments from the editorial team:

Whilst white supremacy, Islamophobia and anti-blackness are indeed global features structuring contemporary politics, and the literatures with which the manuscript engages speak to the ways in which colonialism formed the racial, political, and economic orders shaping modernity, this is not explicitly developed or elaborated within the piece. Instead, it currently focuses quite specifically upon the UK context - tailored to a particular audience - without explication of this context, extrapolation of it more broadly or consideration of its ramifications for the international or International Relations. Given our mandate around theory development in international studies, however broadly and interdisciplinarity conceived, the piece might be better suited to another journal focused more on race and class, or terrorism studies.

As an early career researcher, I took this commentary constructively with the understanding that rejection is commonplace in academia. In the article in question, I theoretically examined a public policy moment where a conservative Muslim Member of Parliament who was contesting British counterterrorism policy’s sponsoring of Islamophobia, called for wider societal solidarity with British Muslims on the basis of Britain’s legacy of political Blackness. My argument was that there was an international legacy of Muslim political elites instrumentalising race for similar reasons. All while failing to contest the racist structures that contributed to Islamophobia and the wider legacy of imperial
oppression that foregrounded anti-Muslim racism in the first place. Using the work of WEB Du Bois (1903) and historian Cemil Aydin (2017), I maintained that there was a global history of Muslim polities upholding imperial logic and in turn a global colour line in their endeavours to resist the racial effects of European imperialism that was reflected in this British policy debate. Du Bois’ argument of the colour line posits that international affairs is organised along an apex by Western imperialism and that it continues to be divided into blocs of white and dark by imperial actors for the purpose of political control (Henderson, 2017; Narayan 2019). According to this theory, there are deep interconnections between past and present practices of imperialism performed by state institutions and the production of racialised categories observed in the everyday. On this basis, similar to recent interventions made elsewhere by Conway (2021), on the subject of ‘Radicalism, Respectability, and the Colour Line of Critical Thought’, the aim of this piece was to demonstrate how International Relations (IR) is not an enclosed space. It instead finds its presence intermingled in British Muslim policy endeavours to resist racism amidst times of national security.

You can imagine my surprise when this same journal held a conference only 2 months later which incorporated not one but two roundtables titled: ‘Your work is not International Relations’. Each panel consisted of participants who were analytically engaging moments when they as scholars were told that their scholarship was not IR. As I noted the repeated celebration of the existence of such panels by this journal amidst their various social media platforms with irony, this reality left me questioning my research’s positioning in relation to this finding. Inspired by my moment of questioning, this reflective piece aims to come to terms with how to confront the recognition that IR as a published discipline differs in relation to what it will externally celebrate and internally silence when it comes to discussions of the global ramifications of race in international politics. By positing the question – why does IR not think my research is IR? – it is the hope that this piece brings constructive reflection concerning which worlds matter to those who see themselves as safeguarding the sanctity of international studies.

The aim of this essay is to use my individual experience as an entry point for speaking to a structural pattern in IR scholarship. Here, I explore how observing the scholastic process of connecting disciplinary boundaries to real political lines demarcates an ongoing concern with how some academics pursue a monopoly on understandings of ‘the international’, treating its porous semi-arbitrary boundaries as though they define the political issues that traverse them (Conway, 2021). Some have described this monopoly as a form of methodological disciplinarity, a practice where research becomes restricted within disciplinary borders because of scholastic endeavours to keep the discipline pure. In this process, IR gatekeepers come to reject IR’s existence as a discipline that exists between fields, being focused on metaphorically manning the academic watchtower. By being busy policing what is and what is not a global issue, these same intellectuals miss key opportunities for innovative knowledge production concerning the international. As Annika Olsson (2015: 47) observes, ‘scholars of all kinds need to cross the borders of their disciplines more often’ if they are to bring new knowledge home. Vitalis concurs in his own exploration of the birth of American IR, where he writes that ‘the boundaries of international relations theory and in particular work in security […] remain open and ripe for infiltration’ (2015:180). We indeed need to challenge ‘the bodies and borders of literature’ if we are ever to truly understand the structural nature of inequities in knowledge sharing in international studies (Olsson, 2015: 47).

On the question of whose bodies? Importantly, in the opening quote, it appears that the editors responding to my article felt that their contributing authors had to tick several boxes on their checklist. Not just to earn the right to exist within the purview of the journal but also to be considered international studies. My concern lies with how these editors seem disconcerted by how broadly their mandate may have been conceived instead of welcoming such breadth in conceptualisation. In the arena of IR, post-structural scholars have long since argued that the boundary between the international and domestic is insecure. Using the writings of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and Žižek, Edkins (1999), for example,
famously contested the technical arrangements that erroneously restricted the notion of the international subject when politics was presented as being a subsystem of social order instead of being seen as a mirror of a society’s own forgotten foundation – cutting off human beings from their sense of self. Others such as Charbonneau and Cox (2010: 14), in the context of foreign policy analysis, write how it is in locally situated security practices that scholars often find spaces where vital ‘elements of state power and global order are produced and reproduced’. So, why were the editors I quoted uncomfortable in the case of another break with the international–domestic divide prompted on the basis of a race-orientated tradition? A problem is that their anxiety and discomfort with a lack of perimeters being erected in this specific instance may possibly have been grounded in a particular epistemic genealogy where having a monopoly on how the international is conceived also constituted a form of racial domination. Allowing an analytical radicalism to be applied to IR problems only so far as they do not cross Eurocentric-white boundaries for what still constitutes intellectual respectability.

As a discipline, IR has historically provided numerous sources of intellectual rationale to justify only certain conceptions of the international which foreground norms of white subjectivity, and that in turn epistemically constrain the boundaries of political imagination within the discipline. This is largely as a result of IR’s origin, as a policy science devised to resolve dilemmas ‘facing the white Western powers’ because of colonial administration (Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam, 2015: 2). IR’s academic conventions more often than not still prompt recognition of how colonial histories matter yet are muted in the politics of the present. This is so in how these conventions still force the centre of non-Western and non-white people’s worlds to exist at the margins of the world(s) European imperialists endeavoured to create (Shilliam, 2021). In this regard, calling out racial attitudes to IR expertise necessitates drawing attention to how lines are drawn between intellectuals who are accused of dabbling in ‘selective colonial historiography for “political” purposes’, and those who are actually seen as ‘bona fide’ in international studies on the basis of the way they choose to assess what is global (Stoler, 2011:137). The public performance of solidarity by scholastic institutions appearing to support scholars that raise the issue of anti-imperial perspectives, all while still preventing the professional dispersal of their knowledge behind the scenes is indicative of the wage of white supremacy. This is so in how these IR gatekeepers enable perpetrators of intellectual tokenism to evade detection and accountability for their part in furthering imperialist ways of knowing the issues that plague the world populations. These same actors, counterintuitively, directly ensure that a limited understanding about how different populations experience world politics prevails.

Paraphrasing Neal (2003:57), ‘given the extent to which race is a “shapeshifter”’, the editors I encountered were right to suggest that I examine British occurrences of racial discourses in their immediate circumstances of British politics. Without situating British policy debates concerning Islamophobia within the exact contours of British debates concerning race, Islamophobia and counterterrorism politics, the most immediate societal connections to be made in empirical analysis are at risk of being lost in broad debates on theory. The editorial team in question was not wrong to suggest that my piece might be well suited for a journal on race and class or terrorism studies. Such journals would indeed be examples of valid terrain for my empirical investigation to be framed within. Where their mistake lies is in how this same editorial team suggests that discussing a situation of British Muslims contesting Islamophobia amidst a counterterrorism regime is ‘tailored to a particular audience - without explication of this context’. This comment is problematic. Why is it assumed that a particular audience, not a global audience, is interested and affected by the problems of British Muslims contesting imperial structures and institutions like that of counterterrorism? Especially when these issues are specifically framed as matters of the colour line, a conceptual framing of race-orientated political interventions which maintains the historically interconnected and cross-dimensional nature of relations between the darker to the lighter races of men ‘in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea’ (Du Bois, 1903:16).
It is perhaps not that my editors did not know the above problematique but that they actively did not want to welcome this conversation into their space. The reality of having the power to manage different spaces of the international is significant for foregrounding which truths may be told about the relations of the world. For instance, recent works by Shilliam (2021) depict how it can be said that one of the reasons IR academics historically discouraged a continuum between domestic and international politics is because of the discipline’s own longstanding reverence for a distinction to be made between the European imperium, a territory under imperial domination, and the alleged anarchic spaces external to the imperium. These two spaces were traditionally seen as being qualitatively different by the white European thinkers who theorised about them. According to 19th century colonial logics, outside of the imperium existed chaotic bodies – meaning chaotic bodies of people, cultures, religions, etc. – who were inherently uncivilised. Meanwhile, within the imperium, governing bodies remained committed to legal, moral and philosophical rationalisations for European imperial domination. Therefore, the boundary separating the imperium from the non-imperium, the domestic from the international, is not just a geographic divide. It is prescriptive. Normative. It is a periphery that affirms the supposed metaphysical dissimilarity between civilised powers and uncivilised peoples – therefore validating the need for a different set of rules to be used to engage the problems that affect an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. It can only be imagined how frustrating it may have been for those who held these ideals, if they had ever been confronted by Du Bois’ argument that the realities of those who existed in European societies of the Western hemisphere were inescapably tied to the realities and histories of those who faced ‘unyielding autocracy’ in the colonies (Du Bois, 1925: 423). As early as 1925, Du Bois had realised that a system predicated on racial hierarchy defied the disciplinary and political lines put forward by his predecessors, making problems of domestic and international racist conflict two sides of the same human entanglement (Du Bois, 1925).

It is the racial dichotomy of the colour line, which was imposed by the white peoples of Europe on the ‘coloured’ peoples of all the other continents from the 16th century to the 19th century, that became a fixed design and that created what appeared to be a permanent, vertical, ‘schism in the structure of the international system’ (Bandopadhyaya, 1977: 25). Because of its vertical nature, racism as a system remains both systemic and sub-systemic at the same time (Thompson, 2015). White supremacy remains here as it does there. Its national and international threads are strung together to link issues emanating from colonialism, transatlantic slavery and the rise of capitalism to the political circumstances of British Muslims maintaining that Muslim lives matter, with ‘historical and empirical linkages’ serving as the co-constitutive glue between each subject (Bandopadhyaya, 1977: 23). The very fact that we as academics choose to isolate racialised albeit complex issues like that of British Muslim antiracist responses to security or any other racialised phenomena ongoing in the European metropole, from colonialisms elsewhere, is a learned division (Rutazibwa, 2020). A learned division that is counterproductive for anti-colonial reflection and dialogue and anti-imperial solidarity. It is possible for all these forms of colonialism to be assessed co-constitutively without conflating important variations in time, location and characteristics. Yet as Rutazibwa notes, recentring such issues so that they can be assessed in such a way is an affront to the naturalisation of coloniality and the amnesia it entails to separate the metropole from systems beyond the West (ibid). The problem for those who find scholars who disregard the international–national divide to be a problem, is in how creating such bridges between the West and the rest prompts an epistemological earthquake. A rupture where a coloniser can no longer imagine themselves to be socially islanded, marooned alongside their disavowed companions, companions from whom they profit, depend upon, control and dominate.

As a researcher of IR who is arguing that race thinking amidst counterterrorism is reflective of wider imperial processes and international legacies, when observing the United Kingdom, it is difficult to deny that the lines the British state has historically established to secure its own autonomous place in the world are dividing humanity. This is so both within and outside its borders. The
lines reinforced by the current Johnson cabinet concerning security policy, immigration reform and labour conditions are establishing boundaries grounded in whiteness within the diverse communities that reside within Britain. These lines, as Kundnani (2007), Bhambra (2017a) and Shilliam (2018) have each argued, are tied into an international history of empire, to which Britain played a part and continues to be plagued by despite its official narrative of no longer being systematically racist. Similarly, there is a calculated blindness involved in IR scholarship which only acknowledges global racial formations as those that emerge between regions geographically, but not those ‘contained racially hierarchical formations within them’ (Sabaratnam, 2020: 10). Unpacking knowledge restrictions imposed on international studies requires acknowledging how even in IR’s critical spaces, racism continues to empower a Eurocentric division of humankind into white and non-white populations, via the field’s intellectual contempt for the closing of the distance between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. Requests made by IR scholars to allocate analyses of race elsewhere are at their best avoidant, showing an unwillingness to problematize normative ideas about where international politics ought to occur. But at their worst, they are simplifying complex and multi-layered political circumstances so that their interrelationship cannot occur in a way where an epistemological whiteness is not sat comfortably at the centre.

The request to allocate discussions of race elsewhere out of the international conversations reaps of epistemological tropes that prop up the hierarchy of human interest and the subject positionings, where by some standard, racism is still conceived as an isolated issue. What is meant by epistemological whiteness is the manner in which white-racialised subject-positioning manifests ‘as particular epistemic patterns that functionally relate to their dominant position in this racial formation, patterns which can be marked as inter-locking epistemologies of immanence, ignorance, and innocence’ (Sabaratnam, 2020: 6). Such patterns include the ‘norm against noticing’ how explicit conversations of ‘race’ come to be systemically pushed to the margins on the basis of supposedly neutral criteria that paints these conversations as dissident (ibid). A number of scholars have resisted this. As seen with publications by Kundnani (2007; 2015); Narayan (2017; 2019); Razack (2004; 2008) and Shilliam (2015; 2018), amongst others, in IR discourse, it is increasingly commonplace to acknowledge that imperialism moves between both old and new poles of exploitation and, accordingly, between the domestic and the international. These scholars support the fact that events such as the build-up of counterterrorism regimes in places such as Britain also demonstrate how the modern effects of imperialism are refracted through engrained relationships of race, class and nationalism ongoing in the Global North – a relationship explicitly tied to histories of colonial domination by the European powers throughout the Global South (Narayan and Sealey-Huggins, 2017).

As Narayan (2019: 949) argues, the very tenet of the British concept of political blackness is that the common experience of colonial rule and subsequent state racism in the United Kingdom transnationally unites members of the African, Caribbean and Asian migrant communities as ‘Black’ peoples. Numerous writings on political blackness exist, alongside other political pieces discussing issues such as the public reaction to the result of EU referendum, the mishandling of tragedy that was the Grenfell tower fire and the ongoing fight to decolonise British higher education. These issues each demonstrate that within the United Kingdom, there persists a wealth of racial experience that collectively constitutes theorisation about the way the world is and has been organised in relation to racial hierarchy (Bhambra, 2017a, 2017b; Shilliam, 2018; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). With this wealth of literature, how can the gatekeepers of the IR community continue to turn a blind eye to the fact that knowledge that pertains to the racialised experience of surviving and resisting imperial legacies, even within the Global North, reflects a global experience faced by the majority of the world’s population?

Circulating on social media nearing the time of my rejection was a tweet by Pulitzer Prize Winner Viet Thanh Nguyen, which stated the following:
Writers from a minority, write as if you are the majority. Do not explain. Do not cater. Do not translate. Do not apologize. Assume everyone knows what you are talking about, as the majority does. Write with all the privileges of the majority, but with the humility of a minority.

Such notes of inspiration cause me to wonder: whether Nguyen’s comments can or should apply to academic writers? Particularly when those at the gates of IR are resistant to suggestions that a racial experience specific to marginalised communities can also be globally meaningful. The very purpose of adopting an analytical approach to the subject of race in the context of IR is to offer a corrective to ‘theoretical approaches that are too often ignorant to the ways in which race and racism’ organise investigations of international politics (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019: 2). Categorising attempts at such approaches as non-IR only serves the purpose of demonstrating how IR intellect is still codified as white and how analyses of race and racism are still not seen as collective issues that echo beyond national borders. Rejections of conversations of race as matters of international study demonstrate how conventional and critical interpreters of what constitutes IR both still do not intuitively grant race agency despite such concepts being integral to the discipline. This is not a matter of interdisciplinarity. This is a matter of how within the discipline itself, race thinking operates as a structure of thought, dividing the discipline, and the world between what is deserving and underserving of scholastic attentiveness. And scholastic reward. Suggesting one’s commentary is not IR is once again a matter of drawing lines. It is placing components of world politics in categories that appear relatively innocent yet are virulent and connected to IR’s incipient mode as an intellectual rationale justifying white ways of knowing racialisation.

True analytical reflexivity in IR academia calls for the dismantling of disciplinary gates. It asks those who interpret the knowledge of IR as IR, who benefits the most from what we do as academics? Who benefits the most from academics accounting for the systems which allow IR experts to be situated as privileged knowers? Niang reminds readers of IR that location is a place of innovation in the discipline. Location is where theoretical analysis starts and dictates more than a passing engagement with the life worlds of subjects. It is in fact the very life worlds of subjects themselves that promote a ‘less reductive picture of the making of the international’ (Niang, 2016: 454). The life worlds of political subjects should therefore function as a potential space in which alternative readings of the international might be articulated. As part of my research, I continue to argue that the world that exists before a British Muslim contesting counterterrorism legislation says more about the international than these editors may have been willing to consider. I raise this point to call attention to the post-racial narrative that some journals uptake as they celebrate bringing racial analysis into IR theory. They celebrate race only as a subject of political interest – albeit with eye-opening and nuanced knowledges – but still not genuinely as sources of truer accounts of the world as it exists.

As the postcolonial and anti-imperial traditions to which I attest are increasingly celebrated as innovative ways of knowing across the IR community, it is hoped that new spaces previously confined to studies of race will be authentically opened up so that scholastic conventions that previously barred their considerations from IR will face continued abolition. As boundaries are broken and bridges are crossed so that the previous us and them dichotomy becomes a plateau where a ‘them’ speaks and an ‘us’ listens, it is hoped that those responsible for international studies as a published discipline will continue abandoning their roles as gatekeepers. It is hoped that they will become more receptive to realise that they are in fact the target audience of analyses grounded in race.

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**Author Biography**

**Dr Amal Abu-Bakare** is a lecturer in the politics of race and decolonial studies at the University of Liverpool and Visiting Fellow at the University of South Wales’ International Centre for Policing and Security. As a Saudi-born Nigerian dual citizen of Canada and the United Kingdom, Abu-Bakare is interested in all things international, particularly food and politics. Her current research profile remains centred on using anti-colonial IR theory to explore how North American and European political/security institutions continue to empower racially configured exclusions and terror.