

Becoming Under the White Gaze: Racialized Male Subjectivity in Dutch Education

Master thesis

Sociology: Engaging Public Issues

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Abstract

Inequalities in Dutch secondary education are well-documented. However, the day-to-day experiences of racialized boys are rarely studied. This study asks: How do racialized men recall, interpret and navigate being constructed as threats during high school, and how did these experiences shape their sense of self? Eight racialized men aged 25-45 participated in semi-structured, retrospective interviews on their experiences in secondary education. An abductive thematic analysis, theorized through Fanon's racial epidermal schema, Du Bois' double consciousness and Curry's concept of racial misandry, analyzed this in three stages. (1) Their encounters with the white gaze and racialized disciplinary practices in high school. (2) Navigation and resistance. (3) Lingering afterlives in sense of self. Retrospection was an instrumental part of this research: Because of this temporal distance from their experiences, Participants were better able to trace the racialized aspects of their past experiences.

Keywords: Double consciousness, racial hidden curriculum, subjectification, Fanon, Black Male Studies

Introduction

Critical scholars from Althusser (1971) to Bourdieu (1977) and Freire (1970) have shown that schools do more than teach; they reproduce social hierarchies. This critique has been extended to how schools reproduce racial domination (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Hooks, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Works like Ferguson's *Bad Boys* (2000) and Rios' *Punished* (2011) provide important insights into how racialized boys specifically. They are found to be disproportionately labeled, surveilled, disciplined, and thus constructed as racialized and gendered threats during school, with lingering consequences in their later years.

Research on this subject has been far too limited in The Netherlands, but that is not for a lack of data indicating racial inequalities in Dutch schools. Indeed, data shows the presence of racialized mechanisms of Dutch schooling. The early selection and rigid tracking are found to entrench pre-existing, often racial, hierarchies (van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010). Racialized students — especially those from non-western migration backgrounds — are over-represented in “lower” tracks like VMBO and under-represented in VWO (Sykes & Kuyper, 2013; CBS, 2022). Studies on Dutch school life also find the reproduction of racial hierarchies in everyday practices (Weiner, 2016; Kennedy, 2023).

Weiner (2016, p. 1) revealed racialized mechanisms that “found minority students disproportionately disparaged, disciplined, and silenced”. What remains mostly unexplored, is the intersection between race and gender in these dynamics. The little (quantitative) data that is available usually show some disadvantages specific to racialized male students. For example, racialized boys are more likely to drop out without a diploma or stream into lower educational tracks than their female peers (CBS, 2022; Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2020). While this gender-gap exists among Dutch white students, it was found to be significantly more pronounced among racialized groups, indicating a disadvantage specific to racialization and maleness. Crul (2014) found that racialized boys are often seen as a sort of collective problem, reflecting literature from outside of The Netherlands (Ferguson; 2000, Rios 2011). Yet, how being problematized is *experienced*, internalized, and what imprints it leaves on racialized male students, remains absent in the literature. This is exactly the focus of this study.

If it was feasible, this study might have been a school ethnography. However, this was made impossible due to time constraints. Instead, the (initially practical) choice was made to conduct interviews with racialized men reflecting back on their time in high school. During literature review, I found Paulte's *Toxic Schools* (2013) to be a compelling example of what

school ethnographies can reveal. However, I was dissatisfied with how he seemingly downplays the role of race in his otherwise insightful analyses. Moreover, I found his methodological and epistemological grounds for doing so to be flawed. I argue that Paulle (2013) downplays the value of retrospective accounts, calling them “after-the-fact clichés. This study takes a different stand, and starts from the premise that temporal distance and the lessons learned over time provide a valuable viewpoint — in this case, to study the subjectification of racialized men through high school.

So, the research question is as follows: How do racialized men recall, interpret and navigate being constructed as threats during high school, and how did these experiences shape their sense of self?

This study approaches this question with theories on racial subjectivity such as Fanon’s (1952) theory on the racial epidermal schema and double consciousness (Du Bois, 1970; Moore, 2005) which lay out how racialized subjects become aware of how they are perceived, and often internalize some of those perceptions. Tommy Curry’s (2017) concept of racial misandry, which theorizes how racialized masculinity, because of its violent and threatening depictions in western society, shapes the discipline racialized boys face in high school. Theories on schools as racialized disciplinary apparatuses (Ferguson, 2000; Rios, 2011). The concept of the racial hidden curriculum frames and explains how schools teach students a racialized order, without either teachers or students being aware of it (Ferguson, 2000; Andarvazh et al., 2017). Together, these theories provide the tools used to study high school as a site of racialized male subjectification.

The analysis is made up of three chapters. The first chapter, *Being Seen & Disciplined*, focuses on how participants first became aware of how racialized boys were perceived and disciplined differently in high school. The second chapter, *Learning to Navigate*, details how participants navigated and resisted these conditions. The third chapter, *Internalization and its Afterlives*, traces how this led to the internalization of racist narratives, and how these experiences have continued to shape their lives into adulthood, especially with regards to their sense of self. The discussion reframes this emergent sense of self as a more evolved form of double consciousness.

Theoretical framework

The Positionality of Racialized Men

Frantz Fanon (1952) described the Black man as a phobogenic object—an object that incites fear in white people simply through presence. This fear is incited because of its perceived threat, and explains why racialized boys are treated as ‘deviant’, even in the absence of actual ‘deviant’ behavior. In the classroom, this might be manifested in teachers being more vigilant, disproportionately disciplining racialized boys, intensified surveillance — all responses not in reaction to, but in anticipation of a threat (Fanon, 1952; Curry, 2017). Indeed, literature in the Dutch context shows these same patterns (Weiner, 2016; Kennedy, 2023). In this context, the disciplinary and surveillance apparatus in schools is turned into one that actively constructs the racialized male as a threat. This study uses the concept of the phobogenic object to analyze how fear of racialized boys precedes and shapes disciplinary action.

Tommy Curry’s (2017) concept of racial misandry can help us understand the construction of racialized students as threats; as criminals, sexual aggressors, physically threatening and violent. Curry (2017) argues that the specific ways Black men relate to criminality, education, and work mean that gender should be understood as focal, rather than causal. As such, gender should draw attention to how sexual designation and its societal perceptions influence the likelihood of disadvantage in varying ways. In *The Man-Not* (2017, p. 135), he writes: “it is empirically true that Black women also suffer from unemployment and job discrimination, but a different bias affects the Black male. This is not a question of denying that both suffer unemployment. It is a question of understanding why Black males seem to be affected differently and disproportionately compared with their female counterparts and a question of why Black females seem to be affected differently and disproportionately compared with other populations”. The point of this study focusing on racialized boys in education is not to deny the bias against racialized girls, but to examine the experiences and subsequent subjectification that may be specific to racialized male students.

Curry (2017) finds that Black men are associated with specific gendered negative stereotypes, such that agentic characteristics (like assertiveness, self-confidence, and conviction) are penalized in professional settings in a way that is sexually specific and intensified by their maleness (Livingston et al., 2012). This penalty is so severe that Black men often adopt disarming behaviors to reduce the perceived threat they pose to white people

(Livingston & Pearce, 2009). The dynamic between the punishment and the disarming of perceived threat is a central aspect to this study. The study examines how this dynamic manifests within the context of high school, as such forms of socialization must be learned long before one enters the professional world.

Schools: Discipline Racial Hidden Curriculum

Andarvazh et al. (2017, p. 198) define the hidden curriculum as “a hidden, powerful, intrinsic in organizational structure and culture and sometimes contradictory message, conveyed implicitly and tacitly in the learning environment by structural and human factors and its contents includes cultural habits and customs, norms, values, belief systems, attitudes, skills, desires and behavioral and social expectations can have a positive or negative effect, unplanned, neither planners nor teachers, nor learners are aware of it. The ultimate consequence of the hidden curriculum includes reproducing the existing class structure, socialization, and familiarizing learners for transmission and joining the professional world.” Indeed, there is a hidden *racial* curriculum in schools as well (Massialas, 1996; Gillborn, 2006). In this study, the racial hidden curriculum is understood as a curriculum of subjectification from which racialized male students learn how to orient themselves in the world and navigate power as they encounter the white gaze.

Schools are critical institutions of socialization, and as such a critical setting to investigate the reproduction of racism (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Hooks, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This can be found to occur in specific practices in Dutch schools where they receive more racial harassment and are treated as a collective problem in need of regulatory discipline (Weiner, 2016; Crul, 2024) Ann Arnett Ferguson’s (2001) ethnographic research on Black boys in American schools finds school actors actively participating in this labeling process. Ferguson (2001) examines how discipline is not happening for mere misbehavior, but for the perceived “nature” of Black boys. Thus, labeling becomes more than a consequence of behavior, but a mechanism through which schools construct the projected nature of their racialized male students. Ferguson (2001, p. 2) conceptualizes school labeling and disciplinary practices as part of a hidden curriculum that systematically marginalizes Black male youth and “brand them as criminally inclined.” Ferguson (2001) emphasizes how the hidden curriculum and its unofficial lessons are embedded in routine disciplinary practices that constructs the racialized male threat.

Rios (2011, p. 94) wrote about how “the boys in Oakland were not seen as souls that

needed to be disciplined but as irreparable risks and threats that needed to be controlled and ultimately contained.” This study draws on this framework where racialized boys being perceived as threats renders them subject to disciplinary practices that go beyond reform, instead functioning as a way to regulate a perceived danger presented by the racialized male threat.

Rios writes about how institutions misrecognize the intentions of racialized students. Even in their attempts to comply, they are understood as expressing disrespect or disinterest. This aligns with Ferguson’s (2001) observations that racialized boys are often disciplined for merely embodying certain forms of masculinity and speech deemed inappropriate due to their Blackness. Ferguson (2001, p. 86) explains how “the school reads their expression and display of masculine naughtiness as a sign of an inherent vicious, insubordinate nature that as a threat to order must be controlled.” Hereby, the disciplining of Black masculinity, becomes integral to how schools reproduce the racial order. I examine how participants recall moments of being misread, even in their attempts to comply, to understand how institutional bias shapes discipline.

The Racial Epidermal Schema and Corporeality

In *Toxic Schools* (2013), Paulle challenges the idea that race is a primary factor of student behavior. He argues that actions are mostly shaped by embodied dispositions, rather than racialized notions. Students, we are told, act on pre-reflective, habitual responses to their environment, determined by their position in the school’s social field. He argues that the idea of race’s primary importance, hinges on the notion of *mental interpretation preceding action*. Instead, behavior is not driven by mental processes, but corporeal engagement with one’s environment.

Paulle (2013) correctly notes the importance of the specific practices that students engage with in-the-moment. However, Paulle does not fully acknowledge how much race factors in, and its impact on one’s corporeal engagement. Indeed, mental interpretation does not need to precede action for race to come in. As a result, while his analysis of in-the-moment practices is otherwise insightful, the study fails to account for how race functions as a structuring force.

This oversight is most clear when applying Fanon’s concept of the *racial epidermal schema*. As Fanon (1952, p. 112) stated, when confronted with the white gaze, the corporeal schema crumbles and has “its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. (...) it was no longer

a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. I had already stopped being amused. It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other . . . and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea” I argue that the disruption of one’s normal corporeal schema, to a racial epidermal schema, complicates Paulle’s view. While the analysis of in-the-moment practices of students in high-poverty, high-stress school environments remains insightful, it fails in fully accounting for the racial dimension. As (Fanon, 1952, p. 163) wrote, “it is in his corporeality that the Negro is attacked. It is as a concrete personality that he is lynched. It is as an actual being that he is a threat”. In that, it is not just how you are perceived by others that shifts, but your subjectivity itself, as you learn to observe yourself through the eyes of others as one of many.

Though the displacement of the corporeal schema by the racial epidermal schema may not always occur through a dramatic incident — as Fanon recounts in his famous train episode — it may unfold more subtly and cumulatively, through the hidden curriculum. While Paulle (2013, p. 8) acknowledges the presence of a “racialized and racializing symbolic order,” and that this symbolic field was reinforced through a hidden curriculum that reproduced “pseudobiological hierarchies,” he does not take this insight into his analysis of the moment-to-moment behaviors and understandings of students. I argue we should Paulle’s insight further, and incorporate Fanon, by studying how the racialized hidden curriculum manifests in the moments students come to encounter themselves through the white gaze, and how this gaze shaped their self-understanding, and their long-term orientation towards the world.

Double Consciousness and Retrospection

In *Toxic Schools* (2013), (2013) makes one striking conclusion, namely, that race was not as relevant in the context of these two schools as previously thought. In his words, “sometimes skin tones or perceptions about ethnonational ancestry influenced behavior in significant ways; sometimes this was no more important than students’ shoe sizes or teachers’ weights” (Paule, 2013, p. 205). While Paulle concurs that race *could* come into play, the argument is that students primarily acted through pre-reflective, embodied dispositions determined by their position within the school’s social field in a way that is not *primarily* racialized.

In addition, Paulle (2013, p. xv) writes about the conversations he had with one student who “never once touched on race, ethnicity, or nationality. Indeed the only time she ever said anything to me at all about such topics was when I asked her directly whether, for example, “black kids, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans” got along in her school. “It ain’t no little racial thing up in here, everybody just be with everybody,” was her seemingly dispassionate response. Even when I cued it up, that is, race seemed not to be a central concern.” Here, Paulle seemingly takes the student’s in-the-moment account at face value.

In contrast, Paulle (2013, xx) argues that retrospective accounts are far less valuable, he states that “all too often what one elicits in interviews are after-the-fact clichés”, implying that this explains the disparity between in-the-moment accounts and retrospection. I argue that the internalization of racism plays an important role here. As Huber et al. (2006) argues, students may have “internalized the negative perceptions of the school to the point that they are no longer able to see racism unless it is in the overt form of racial epithets”. In essence, the (unconscious) acceptance of a racial hierarchy could explain why they do not articulate certain events in racial terms.

This internalization happens in the space between the lived, often unconscious disruption of the corporeal schema and the (often retrospective) awareness of racialization for students. Thus, retrospection is not a distortion of what happened, but one of the view vantage points from which former students can articulate their experience. For they did not necessarily articulate them in non-racial terms because racialization was absent, but they might have lacked the consciousness and language to name that disruption at the time, especially to a teacher.

The concept of double consciousness can help us understand this process. Double consciousness refers to the ‘twoness’ that Black subjects experience, forced to see themselves through the eyes of whites. Gooding-Williams (2009) argues, it can actually result in a “false self-consciousness”, one that fosters internalization of the white gaze.

However, in *Dusk of Dawn* (1970), Du Bois describes how his double-consciousness was a practical orientation toward a racist world. “I was by long education and continual compulsion and daily reminder, a colored man in a white world; and that white world often existed primarily, so far as I was concerned, to see with sleepless vigilance that I was kept within bounds. (...) I could not stir, I could not act, I could not live, without taking into careful daily account the reaction of my white environing world.” (Du Bois, 1970, p. 135–6). While there are real constraints imposed by his hostile environment, it indicates the possibility of a form of double consciousness not defined by full internalization, but strategic

practice. Its main purpose is to anticipate, navigate how a white world reacts to your Blackness. In this sense, double consciousness can be an adaptive survival technique (Moore, 2005). If one reaches a moment where double consciousness evolved to this level, perhaps retrospection can allow one to look back at one's experience and the racialized impact.

Methodology

Data collection

This study used a qualitative research design with semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, they were asked to recall how they observed and navigated their racialization during high school, and how these experiences shape their sense of self. A list of interview topics and accompanying (open) questions was used. Each interview started with telling the participants about the goal of the study, the anonymization of the data, and their right to retract their participation from the study at any point during, or after the interview. Most of the interviews took around 90 minutes. They were recorded with a recording device, transcribed with transcribing software, and subsequently corrected and coded with Atlas.TI.

The interviews were routed in a way that began with easy biographical questions and gradually moved toward more sensitive topics. The interview questions broadly followed the order of the analytical chapters: what participants recalled about racialized discipline and surveillance → how they navigated this → how it affected them. This gave participants more of a chance to think more concretely about how the events they recalled affected them.

Most participants were selected purposively, based on my prior knowledge of their experiences. However, three were recruited more informally. I spent time at The Niteshop on Fridays, when barber Gaaf had his clients over, and talked casually about my thesis with his clients. If someone seemed interested and engaged with the topic and fit the inclusion criteria, I asked if they would be open to participating. With some, we did not manage to line up our schedules, but they were all enthusiastic to join. The final sample consisted of eight participants between the ages of 25 and 45, all racialized men who had attended Dutch secondary schools. Their racialized backgrounds varied: two were Somali, and the others included one Cape Verdean, one Tanzanian, one Turkish, one Algerian, one half-Nigerian and half-Indonesian, and one half-Cape Verdean and half-Moroccan. Participants differed in educational track, including all from VMBO-Kader to VWO. With the exception of two

participants, one of whom was interviewed in their car and the other on the Woudestein campus, all interviews took place at The Niteshop.

Racialized men is a peculiar term. Indeed, white men are also racialized. For this study, we mean subordinated racializations that are constructed as threats (Fanon, 1952; Curry, 2017). For this study, the choice was made to select Black and/or muslim men.

This study uses the viewpoint of retrospection of the participants to understand their experiences. While this may not provide the most accurate portrayal of actual events, it provides other advantages. Firstly, it gives us insight into how the participants make sense of the impact of their high school experiences later in life, which is central to our research question. Secondly, internalized racism often prevents students from directly naming racialized treatment (Huber, 2006). Temporal distance from this moment of internalization might provide participants the opportunity to re-interpret their recollected experiences.

Furthermore, as a researcher, I have the positionality of a racialized man who went to a Dutch high school in common with my participants. This common standpoint gives me the epistemic advantage of being able to better grasp the situatedness of the participants' experiences (Toole, 2021). Nonetheless, reflexivity had to be practiced. As Victor Rios (2011, p. 65) I wanted to prevent a “narrative in which I risked creating a study centered around my own subjective experiences and not the concrete array of experiences facing the boys in the field”.

Analysis

The study used a thematic analysis with an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This allowed for iterations between collected material and theoretical concepts. Rather than choosing a set of theories, coding my data, and making a thematic analysis, the theoretical focus shifted more to a focus on a development of double consciousness, based on emergent themes during interviews.

The coding process began with open coding, focusing on moments during the interviews that felt meaningful. These codes were subsequently organized to identify connections across interviews through axial coding (the analysis' subheadings). Finally, the codes were refined into overarching patterns through selective coding (the analysis' chapters). This process was iterative; the theoretical framework was revised as patterns and thus, themes emerged. As the temporal aspect emerged in both the interviews and analysis, this shaped the structure of my analytical chapters. The complex array of experiences and reflections was organized into three chapters that follow a loose trajectory of subjectification

that mirror the sequence of the interviews. Thus, reflecting not only how meaning was constructed in my analysis as a researcher, but also how it emerged during the course of our conversations.

Chapter 1: The White Gaze & Discipline

Encountering the White Gaze

The participants all described how they realized they were seen through the white gaze. Elias mentioned how he was aware of this right away. He “did not want to be seen as that Black boy who is always mad”. This was not something he only came to learn about through how he assumed he could be perceived himself, but other Black boys as well. He recalled one kid who would always be seen as the bad guy by teachers, how it eventually became a label for him, and he feels like this eventually made him feel forced to accept that role over time, reflecting broader labeling practices of racialized male students (Ferguson, 2001; Rios, 2011). This also mirrors Fanon’s concept of the racial epidermal schema, where one experiences their Blackness as imposed and already labeled by others, as “overdetermined from without” (Fanon, 1952). Elias learned to anticipate this reading of his body *before* action. Indeed, this is where we see the disruption of the normal corporeal schema occurs.

This role of the angry Black boy was something Elias wanted to avoid. This had some important implications for how he navigated his proximity to other Black boys around him, which we will get further into in chapter 2. What is important here, is that one's introduction to the white gaze is not an isolated experience, but a socially mediated one. Mo also realized how this association with the racialized boys who were labeled as problems would change the image teachers would have of him. Daniel recalled how other racialized male students at his school were treated more unfairly. Looking back, Daniel, Mo and Elias felt like the school often wanted to send a message to other racialized male students.

Mo described how he became more rebellious in his third year of high school, while Daniel described how switching to a majority-white school made him more reserved. This shows the limits of typologies used by Paulle (2013) like “gangsters” versus “nerds”, as they can flatten the actual social lives of students. In practice, students moved more fluidly across those categories, and this seemed to be context-dependent.

The participants noted how teachers would *expect* them to be transgressive, and that they would have a way of dealing with racialized boys. Mo called it a “manual” where they are seen as “too busy, chaos, *rwina* (...). Always in groups”. Omar even recalls how a new teacher introduced himself to the class, bragging about his experience working at a youth prison. There, the branding of racialized boys as Ferguson (2001) described it, became most explicit. It reflects what Rios (2011, p. 94) wrote about racialized boys being seen as “irreparable risks and threats that needed to be controlled and ultimately contained”.

One of my participants, Jonathan, was reported that he didn't experience the same kind of racialized treatment in high school as others did. However, he recalled a formative moment at the end of elementary school, when his teacher gave him a VMBO-kader recommendation and remarked: "You can't turn a nickel into a dime." The message was clear: his potential was fixed. To him that served as motivation throughout high school, and beyond: "I was aware early on. (...) I just knew, I want to protect my reputation." Thus, even if you are not yourself labeled with certain labels, managing your reputation becomes an inescapable aspect of school life for racialized male students.

Racialized Discipline

Disciplinary practices were crucial for familiarizing the participants with the white gaze at high school. Mo recalls one incident where one of his teachers grabbed a hat off the head of an Iraqi classmate and threw it out the window and kicked him out of the class. Not only was this without warning, but other white students were also wearing hats, and they did not get this treatment. He interpreted this as a warning towards other students about them wearing hats. In retelling another incident of unequal punishment, this time towards him, he recalls thinking "would you have reacted the same way if it were a *Jantje*?"

Daniel recalls how what was just seen as normal at his first school (play-fighting, teasing friends) was received very differently at his second majority-white school. "[the teachers] were more like, it had to stop right away, you know, because if we have one of them in class, things immediately escalate. And that was mostly the teachers of Dutch origin." This is a prime example of the school reading racialized "expression and display of masculine naughtiness as a sign of an inherent vicious, insubordinate nature that as a threat to order must be controlled." Ferguson (2001, p. 86).

Isaac brought up several moments of what he recalled as racialized discipline. One day he came into the classroom to do a test, and went to sit between two of his white friends in the middle of the class. The moment he sat down, he got called out for disturbing order, and was sent out of the class: "immediately, the moment I walked into the classroom... Between my two Dutch friends. The teacher immediately said I was disturbing the order. And I got sent out of the classroom. While I wasn't doing anything."

He found that most racialized male students were placed to the sides of the classroom close to the door. He would often be told to move to that part of the classroom by teachers: "we don't think it's a good idea for you to sit there. Because you are... once again, disturbing the order." In his mind, this was by design. If they were closer to the door, it would be easier

to kick them out of the class, and they would leave earlier. Though he admitted there was no way for him to actually prove this. Nonetheless, it had made such a strong impression on him that he thinks about it to this day. He had a “place” in the classroom, which became a classroom with a racialized spatial order. This is a spatial manifestation of the racial hidden curriculum which Ferguson (2001) described as one to marginalize and isolate racialized male youth.

Elias recalled how fellow racialized male students would be disciplined disproportionately, though it did not happen to him: “it’s more that I saw it happen to others. That others were dealt with harshly to prevent it from having to happen again. Also kind of as an example to show everyone else that it’s not okay.” Daniel reiterated the idea that teachers made an example of other students, recalling how one of his peers got immediately expelled without warning: “maybe it was meant as an example, like ‘okay, don’t do things like that’. This is what can happen, you know? Otherwise, you’ll just be expelled without any explanation.”

To the participants, discipline was not just about correcting behavior, it was about defining which students were seen as dangerous. As Ferguson (2001, p. 92) notes, punishment often involved making an example of a racialized boy “before an audience of his peers, (...) an occasion for a teacher to (re)mark the identity of a boy as disruptive.” If one misbehaves in the eyes of teachers, students risk becoming “a lesson to other children in the room about what it means to be caught in the spotlight of disciplinary power. The spectators learn that to get in trouble with authority is to risk becoming the example, the spectacle for the consumption of others.” Ferguson (2001, p. 94). Discipline was a way to label certain boys as problems, and to warn others not to associate with them, let alone act like them.

In this context, the participants learned to see themselves through the eyes of the white gaze — setting the tone for how they further navigated school life.

Chapter 2: Learning to Navigate

Outperforming the Gaze

Several participants recalled moments where they recall navigating this white gaze. One that was brought up most frequently was by trying to academically outperform other students. Elias told how he found an effective way to steer clear of getting a negative label: “I was always that kid who just... Got tens and stuff like that. Everyone in class thought I was smart. And thought that I worked well and hard.”

The participants recalled their parents instilling into them that they need to work harder in order to get the same result as their white peers. As participant Ruben said: “You always have to jump twice as high. (...) So you end up internalizing that anyway.” However, Ruben also reflected on how this pressure to outperform whiteness could have the opposite effect. Rather than motivating effort, it could lead to disengagement: “That can also manifest as problematic behavior. For example, not listening, not paying attention. If you're struggling with a subject, instead of trying your best to get a passing grade.”

Indeed, the pressure for Black male students to constantly prove yourself through outperforming your peers — often from your parents — can become overwhelming, leading to disengagement (Allen, 2014; Ogbu, 2003). Perhaps, this is part of what leads to what school ethnographers have called oppositional school culture (Willis, 1977; Ogbu, 2008), in which students reject the very norms and expectations in which you are perceived to be lacking in.

While performing well academically has its obvious benefits and incentives beyond discipline, it was also clearly tied to the need to avoid being targeted. Ferguson (2001, p. 95) describes *educability* as a perceived trait that shapes how children are categorized by school staff. The educability of a student influences how they are sorted into reputational categories like “troubled”, “troubling” or “troublemaker”. The more a student is seen as *uneducable*, the more likely it is that even minor behavior is read as a sign of deeper problems and punished accordingly. In this context, good grades also became a way to avoid being read through the lens of suspicion. Trying to be seen as more “educable”, to avoid being seen as a threat.

However, even when one *does* perform well, it doesn’t necessarily protect against being marked as deviant. Isaac described how his high grades made his teachers suspect him more, teachers said “that it was probably because I had copied from someone. Or because I got lucky. I didn’t really hear things like ‘good job’ or ‘you studied well.’ (...) And I was also very often placed alone because of that.” In his case, his excellent performance actually made him more suspicious of deviant behavior, and heightened surveillance.

Guilty by Association

Familiarization with the white gaze is a socially mediated process, how you are perceived is also influenced by who you associate with: navigating your peer group became a strategic decision as well. Elias talked about how the peers he would hang out with would change depending on the presence of this white gaze. He was part of the VWO track at a school where there were also other tracks. Most of the fellow students from his VWO class were white. During break, when other white peers, and especially teachers, were watching, he would hang out with his white peers. When they weren't present during free periods he would hang out with his mostly Black friends from other tracks: "you noticed that we were really loud. But if we did the same thing when everyone else was around, then it wasn't allowed. Then we were being too noisy. We had to shut up."

Notably, it wasn't just about who he was seen with, but also how he could behave. Loudness was permissible in the absence of his white peers and teachers. He was open about this dynamic, even joking about it with his Black friends: "hey, I want to be president. I'm gonna sit with the white boys, because I've got a better shot there than with you guys. And then they'd laugh and stuff." This was squarely a strategic decision for Elias within the school setting, he said: "When we went out or something, who did I prefer to be with? And even now, the people I hang out with. (...) But some of the guys I was in class with... I never really see them anymore."

This reflects what Ferguson (2001) observed: that friendships with white peers rarely carried over into life outside school, and remain shaped by the racialized order of the institution itself where associations with different types of peers affect who you want to be seen with. Goffman (1959) wrote about a distinction between front-stage and backstage behavior, for Elias, the white gaze clearly activated the front-stage behaviors.

Daniel recalled how he did notice how some of his racialized male peers were seen and treated differently based on their performance, and would even strategically get them to interact with teachers on behalf of their friend group: "sometimes when we wanted to bring something up, we'd just say, like, you should do it—because the teachers like you more."

Mo also said that he consciously distanced himself from certain racialized male peers, but he was more blunt about his reasoning: "Because they were always on some bullshit. So yeah, in a way it was just true. And a lot of the guys I had in my class back then ended up in crime too." Though it would be naive to simply interpret this as internalized racism, or reduce it to a strategic decision to be viewed a certain way by teachers, he also recalled that in the presence of teachers with whom he had a good relationship, he specifically distanced himself from those peers, "because then they'd get a different image of me."

Daniel said that at his second school he often would avoid being with too many of his racialized friend group at the same time, and would instead hang out more with his white classmates: “or just chill with one other person somewhere, instead of going with the whole group. (...) Basically, you just stayed a bit closer to your [white] classmates.”

Everyday Resistance

It is important to note that the participants did not just navigate their situation through conformance. Except for Jonathan and Elias, they all brought up how they were at points more subversive. These acts ranged from subtle rule-breaking to overt confrontations with teachers. For example, Isaac described how he explicitly called out racism when he encountered it in teachers, both speaking up for himself and for others: “100%, I also said that. That what they were doing and saying was racist. (...) But I also stood up for my fellow students and friends I had made there. Which really was quite a big issue.

Ruben recalled another instance where he engaged in direct resistance against the school. When a teacher did not allow a student to take a test because she arrived too late, which would guarantee her having to repeat a grade, Ruben spoke up against it and eventually decided not to hand in the test in protest: “I said, sir, come on man. Otherwise she’ll definitely have to repeat the year. (...) I just wrote my name on the paper. Then I won’t take the test either, man.”

Omar recalled how he and his peers felt provoked by the teacher that brought up his experience at youth prison. They got under his skin so much that the teacher got into a physical altercation with one of the students. When the teacher went to the school direction, and they were called upon to come to the office, he and his friends made the physical marks on the students look worse, in order to get the teacher into even more trouble.

Other instances of resistance were more lowkey and symbolic. Daniel recalled how his friend group would deliberately break small rules, as a way to push back against the disproportionate surveillance they faced: “you just tried to... break small rules. Like wearing headgear... Until the point where someone said something about it, and then you’d take it off for a bit, walk away, and put it back on again.”

Though not always grand acts of defiance, these were important challenges to the school’s authority and (racial) order. Indeed, they were practices of everyday *resistance* against power Vinthagen and Johansson (2013), based on their situated position within a

racialized institutional order. Though they did not transform the institution, they withheld full compliance.

Once the participants learned they were labeled as potential trouble, they developed ways to navigate this: over-achievement, strategic socializing, and subtle or open acts of defiance. The next chapter traces how their acts of navigation and acting under constant surveillance of the white gaze lingered in its aftermath.

Chapter 3: Internalization and its Afterlives

“It was just ‘down, down, down’. You just had to stay low. Because who knows what might happen if you rise too high.” – Isaac

After discussing their school experiences, the conversations shifted to reflect on the impact these experiences had on their sense of self. We explored how these experiences influenced their behavior and how they now view their high school years compared to their perceptions at the time.

(Resisting) Internalization

All of the participants shared that they had to some extent and at some point internalized the conceptions that their teachers had of them. Daniel recalled how he internalized the problematization he went through at his second school. “I think at the time I had kind of accepted, okay, we are the problem.” He shared how he feels like he may have been too naive at the time, being unable to fully grasp the racial dynamic: “I was probably quite naive, you could say, back then. It was just like, yeah, the teacher doesn’t like me, period. I didn’t think further like oh, maybe it’s because of my background. I never really thought about it like that back then.”

Daniel recalled how this prevented his friend group from speaking out: “We also never said anything to the mentor or anyone, like yo, he’s treating us differently. Maybe it’s because you already expect it, at some point you’re like yeah, this is just the standard.” Importantly, the ability to perceive (let alone call out) racial dynamics was more developed later in life than during his time in high school.

Noah recalled how teachers’ perception impacted him. “I started to notice that teachers looked at me differently. (...) Eventually, I started to doubt myself a bit.” He explicitly compares this impressionability of him as a child to his mindset now that he’s older: “As a kid you think: okay, if someone says ‘you’re a bad person.’ If you hear that often enough, you start to believe it yourself.”

In contrast, Ruben shared how he resisted internalization, and what role his ideas about race played in that: “I thought, fuck you. It’s because I’m black. You just can’t handle that.” Daniel said that, with the consciousness that he has now, he would have spoken out, but at the time he was more focused on staying out of trouble because he had just went into a higher level track in high school: “Also, of course, a bit of pressure from my mom, you know,

first from Mavo, then going to Havo, and she was like, ‘Okay, now you really need to finish it.’ She also just said, ‘stay out of trouble.’”

Daniel said that he knows this probably would not have changed anything. Indeed, Isaac recalls calling out racism by teachers. Not only did it not change anything, it reinforced the negative perception teachers had of him: “whether it was too loud or too rude. Whatever, you name it, everything negative. It was something I wasn’t supposed to say or something. (...) There were more students who also said something about it, who were treated that way too. So I wasn’t the only one. (...) But no power to bring about any change.”

As Gillborn (2006) argues, the dismissal of racism at schools is part of the hidden curriculum, where students learn to regard racialized students as second-class citizens. Though Huber (2006) observed that internalized racism prevents one from naming it, It seems like the opposite is not the case; being able to name racism does not necessarily protect one from internalizing it. This implies that participants developed a double consciousness during high school, but struggled to avoid measuring their own worth through the eyes of others. As Moore (2005) describes it, a maladaptive dimension of double consciousness.

Afterlives of Schooling

All of the participants shared that they had long-term effects from their experiences. One of those ways was that it created an urge to prove oneself. As mentioned before, Ruben said that he still struggled with the idea that one has to outperform his peers. Isaac too, finds he still deals with this: “I still have the urge to prove myself. (...) For example at work. I can do my job well. Go ahead and check. I can do my job well, really. (...). I constantly... want confirmation that I’m doing well. That I’m not bad.” He shared how it affected his confidence as well: “it took away a lot of self-confidence. A lot of doubt.”

Elias also shared how this manifested to this day in his professional life. “I dress better than other white account managers. Because they have less to prove.” In his words, he learned how to deal with “how to handle the fact that people have certain assumptions about who I am from the moment they meet me.” Though this was purely strategic, he reflected on whether he may have ended up in a self-fulfilling prophecy of needing to prove oneself: “because I start behaving in a way that confirms that reality. And so you stay stuck in a reality where you believe you’re not enough.”

Daniel was not sure if his confidence itself was affected, but did say he became less assertive because of his experiences at his second high school: “I’m a bit more passive than

really active, so that is something that has changed.”

These quotes show the same need to outperform white peers, and are careful not to confirm racist stereotypes of racialized males. This reflects what Curry wrote in *The Man-Not* (2017, p. 21), namely that “Black males are socialized to understand manhood in the context of their vulnerability, the dangers their assertiveness and competitiveness are perceived to have in the larger society”.

Some of the participants reported how their experiences affected their relationship with authority more generally. For example, Omar noted how school is where he first got into trying to see where the boundaries were with authority figures. He described how it was part of the development of his anti-imperialist politics, as for him, teachers were a certain type of representation of power. He shared how his orientation towards teachers and later police had quite some overlap: testing the boundaries, pushing buttons, some teasing. He said that for him, school was a crucial site where he developed a positive relationship with disruption and counter-culture, which stayed a thread throughout his life.

All of this shows how schools play a pivotal role in shaping self-perception. This is reflected by how Isaac also shared how his negatively shaped self-perception influenced how he deals with police until this day: “I already know in advance, I look a certain way. I’m on a list of suspicious persons. Let’s just act extremely normal. Just super neutral and inconspicuous.”

Noah shared that he had developed an aversion to any type of criticism that stayed with him even after his time at school. “Back then I couldn’t really handle criticism. (...) like feedback, you know, on how I could do something better.” Authority and feedback were too contaminated by his experiences in high school to be taken at face value. Fortunately, he was able to process this later on after leaving high school and is now more receptive towards criticism. This mirrors other participants letting go of some maladaptive thought processes and practices, indicating that time can undo some of the internalization that happened during their time in school.

A Note on Retrospection

What became clear throughout the interviews is how different my participants' perception of the situation was at the time compared to now. In their recalling of events, they often emphasized — sometimes without being asked about it — that they did not realize what role racial dynamics played at the time.

Isaac worded it most succinctly: “back then, my analysis would’ve been that it was mostly personal. Because of who I am. But now I’d say it’s because of what I am.” Daniel shared that when recalling the difference in surveillance between his friend group and white peers, he could notice that it was “different, of course, with the Dutch kids. But I didn’t yet have the awareness of whether that was a good or bad thing.”

Mirroring what Noah said on being impressionable as a child, and Daniel on his youthful naivety, Elias shared his reflection on how he looks back compared to when he was still in high school:

“I think that when you’re a kid, like I was back then — 15, 16, 17 or so — you’re not necessarily sure of who you are. And you look at society: what are you allowed to be, or not be? So if society tells me: oh, I’m not supposed to hang out with those boys. Or at least, not hang out with them when other people are watching, because then I’ll be seen as one of the difficult kids. then I go along with that. Because I don’t really know who I am yet. Whereas now, I just hang out with whoever I want. Period. I don’t have to worry about what others think of that. And I don’t need to be president anymore. (...) I think it’s more about insecurity. And more about just still being a kid, rather than about specific things. It’s just a shame that I, as a kid, was thinking that way. And it’s also a shame that probably other boys are thinking that way too.”

Reflecting on his insecurity and relative naivety as a child, he expressed how he would hope to prevent his children in the future from having to go through the same troubles:

“I think that we, just as fathers in the future — you and I both — need to teach our kids certain things. To make sure they get to what I’m saying now earlier than when I found out.”

Discussion

What the findings show is that the participants recall racialized boys not simply being disciplined for misbehavior, but for their perceived potential as threats. If they did not experience it first-hand they recall observing it through others. As such, they were phobogenic objects to their teachers, as described by Fanon (1952). The participants described how this was experienced not only through overt acts of official acts of discipline, but also through surveillance, racialized assumptions, expectations, and other subtle interaction. This combination of formal discipline and everyday racialized practices is what I interpret as part of the hidden racial curriculum in higher education, where the reinforcement of "complex yet at least partially racialized—and therefore potentially 'naturalized'—social

orders" took shape (Paulle, 2013, p. 8). Indeed, these students were either marked as threats before doing anything or observed how their racialized male peers were treated in a similar manner.

Participants and/or their peers were routinely labeled in ways that aligned with dominant stereotypes of the racialized male threat: aggressive, disruptive, or inherently suspicious. As Curry (2017) argues, racial misandry can render the assertiveness, self-confidence, or even academic success of Black men as suspicious or dangerous rather than admirable. Agentic characteristics that would otherwise be interpreted as normal behaviors were read as indicators of threat. Faced with this perception of racialized boys, participants described different ways that they navigated the white gaze and its discipline.

Participants employed an incredibly wide range of practices to navigate this condition, from conforming to institutional norms to defying them. However, this study's analysis had to be focused on a few: excelling academically to appear more "educable" and socially navigating by distancing from other racialized male peers who have been labeled as problems. We found everyday resistance practices from subtle rule-breaking, to overt and open challenges to authority. Big or small, these actions allowed participants to reclaim part of their agency inside an institution that framed them as inherently problematic. These practices demonstrate the ongoing negotiation of how they position themselves within an institution that represents broader power structures. It is important to note that they were not necessarily exclusive, but overlapped, and appeared to be employed strategically and situationally.

This dynamic, where racialized male students learned how they are perceived, and how to navigate this perception, is part of the racial hidden curriculum for racialized boys: an informal, but deeply structured set of lessons about their racial and gendered position in the world (Ferguson, 2001; Gillborn, 2006; Andarvazh et al., 2017). These lessons manifested in formal disciplinary acts, spatial discipline in the classroom and during breaks and labeling. By learning their positions in the racialized order of the white institution of school, they found out what their position is outside of it. The school environment contributed to their ideas on how they were perceived, how they were expected to behave, and what might happen if they failed to adhere to those norms.

Many of the racial narratives the students were perceived through were internalized. As Huber (2006) found, internalized racism can inhibit students from naming or recognizing racism. The participants reported to be a lot more capable of identifying racial dynamics that shaped their high school experiences retrospectively, indicating that some degree of

unlearning had taken place. However, this does not imply that internalization was completely undone. For many, being persistently read as less-than had lingering effects on their sense of self. The idea that one had to keep proving their worth extended into other domains.

Internalization took different forms: a diminished sense of confidence, compulsive self-surveillance, passivity, and a troubled relationship with authority. What we found was a partial disentangling that came with more clarity after high school, but not a complete detachment from the white gaze and its imprint.

This orientation can be understood as a more evolved form of double consciousness, one that is less defined by internal conflict, and more as a practical technique for survival (Moore, 2005). As Du Bois (1970, p. 135–6) wrote in *Dusk of Dawn*, “I was by long education and continual compulsion and daily reminder, a colored man in a white world; and that white world often existed primarily, so far as I was concerned, to see with sleepless vigilance that I was kept within bounds. All this made me limited in physical movement and provincial in thought and dream. I could not stir, I could not act, I could not live, without taking into careful daily account the reaction of my white environing world.” Though it has deep implications for how one lives their life, this description of double consciousness does not necessitate actual internalization, only a careful accounting for one’s white environing world. Of course, the participants did not escape a white environing world when leaving high school, they just entered different parts of it, keeping the need for this practical orientation intact.

In Gooding-Williams (2009) reading of Du Bois, a “false-self consciousness” cannot be overcome without ridding the Black man of the conditions which gave rise to it. According to Gooding-Williams (2009, p. 85) Du Bois envisioned the “struggle for reciprocal recognition” as “equally a struggle for the true self-consciousness of self-conscious manhood because it was in part a fight to eradicate the prejudice that otherwise falsified the self-consciousness obtained through second sight.” This recognition, if it will ever come in the west, is thus far only aspirational. As such, some level of “false-self consciousness” would remain inevitable in what we may call a “practical double consciousness”. Indeed, the participants reported how they still dealt with certain internalizations of racial narratives long after leaving high school.

This is where the methodological significance of retrospection in this study becomes clear. The participants reflected from a distance, after partly unlearning internalized ideas they took up from their time in secondary education. Thus, their insights were not “after-the-fact clichés,” as Poulle (2013) describes retrospective testimony in *Toxic Schools*,

but meaningful accounts of their high school experiences in light of who they have become, and their unlearning of internalized racism. Retrospection need not be a distortion of truth, in fact, it is a necessary vantage point to name dynamics that were unarticulated in the moment.

Paulle's analysis of *Toxic Schools* (2013) offers great insight into the structural stressors and its impact on high-poverty educational environments. However, this study finds that this overlooking of race diminishes the significant impact of the racial hidden curriculum as one of those stressors. One cannot rely on the observation of corporeality without taking into account how the white gaze replaces a racialized person's corporeal schema with the racial epidermal schema (Fanon, 1952). Additionally, in the context of students internalizing racism during their time at school (Huber, 2006), simply accepting in-the-moment accounts on race by students, is a methodological and epistemological flaw.

Though in-the-moment ethnographic interviewing can bring many important things to light, it can miss out on certain patterns which students recognize more fully in retrospect. As Andarvazh et. al (2017, p.198) write, "neither planners nor teachers, nor learners are aware of [the hidden curriculum]". Indeed, this also applies to the *racial* hidden curriculum. As subjects developed their consciousness after leaving, the long arc of racial subjectification became more visible to them in their reflections. Thus, retrospective reflection seems like an unmistakably essential part of understanding how racialization takes shape at high schools.

One limitation of this study is that there is a possible influence of sampling bias, as most interviewees were part of my own social circle or The Niteshop's community. This is a geographical bias, but also a cultural one. Another limitation concerns the method of data collection, even though I argue that retrospection is a methodological strength, it would be worth conducting a similar type of research where retrospective interviews are combined with triangulation through artifacts or longitudinal research. This would not only help in terms of a more accurate representation of events, but also enhance the participants' reflections on the past. Lastly, the study is focused on the experiences of racialized boys, but it cannot be assumed that all of the experiences in this study are necessarily *all* gendered. At some points, participants reported this gendered characteristic themselves, or this was interpreted as such through theory, but more research on the specifics of gendered racialization in the Dutch context is necessary to gain a better understanding.

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