

WHITE EYES, BLACK PLACES. REPRESENTATION AND RACISM

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ABSTRACT

Social scientists have written about African-American communities from a variety of perspectives. This paper is a justification for a work-in-progress that investigates the geographic representations of African-Americans. I will summarize the connections between the act of representation and the material world. It is not my intention to explain the geography of African-American communities, but rather to conduct a critical review of the geographic interpretations of these locales. This endeavor is motivated by the larger project going on within the social sciences that examines the ways in which academic representations of African-American communities have helped obfuscate and perpetuate oppression. Keywords: African-Americans, representation, racism

INTRODUCTION

"White academics with an interest in race must relinquish their self-appointed role as the 'translators' of black cultures, in favour of analyses of white society, i.e. of racism" (Brown 1981, 198).

"The racism of previous generations may now appear self-evident. But one should beware of complacency in assuming that our own ideas [social scientists' and geographers' in particular] are so much more enlightened. ...[C]ontemporary social science can play a similar role to that of 19th-century natural science in providing academic legitimation for popular racist beliefs" (Jackson 1987, 8).

"In line with some critical directions of modern anthropology, this study is not interested in 'exotic' people, here or there, but focuses on Our own ways of thinking and writing about Them" (van Dijk 1993, 16).

After forty years of legislation and popular movements designed to establish civil rights for minority groups in the United States, "de facto segregation, high unemployment rates, bad schooling, inferior housing, and cultural marginalization remain the structural features, among many others, of the minority group position" (van Dijk 1993, 8). What has been the role of the social sciences in the perpetuation of these injustices as they perform their role of "explaining" the conditions under which minorities live? How has the hegemonic discourse created by these ways of knowing contributed to White dominance?

This paper argues for greater scrutiny on the part of social scientists of the discourse concerning minority groups. Specifically, it is a call to pay attention to the dominant text and talk employed by White social scientists studying topics associated with the idea of "race" (Jackson 1987) and African-Americans. The roots of this inquiry lie in recent critiques of the act of representation. Instead of working to create the political space for African-Americans to define themselves, there has been an observed tendency (Brown 1981, Hall 1981, Jackson 1987) among White scholars to

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emphasize translating African-American behavior for a White, middle-class audience that has little intimate contact with Blacks. Thus, what Jackson refers to as the "race relations industry" (1987) has focused its efforts on the "problem" posed by African-Americans in a society dominated by European-Americans -- rather than on the racism that supports White dominance.

What follows are several observations intended to further a work-in-progress concerning the connections between representation and racism. In so doing, I hope to make a contribution to the larger project of reflecting upon the material implications of the ways in which African-Americans have been represented by White social science. As a geographer I am particularly interested in exploring the ways in which geography has obfuscated Black oppression and perpetuated White dominance. In light of this desire, this paper is offered as justification for a work-in-progress which investigates the representations employed within the geographic literature concerning the idea of "race" and African-Americans in general.

ON RACISM

Before writing about the act of representation and its connections to racism, it may be prudent to call upon several sources to clarify what I refer to when using this many faceted term. To begin with, racism has very real and dangerous implications for the daily lives of African-Americans. The emphasis of this paper on talk and text is not intended to be interpreted as somehow relegating racism to a phenomenon that only happens on paper. My purpose in focusing on the discursive aspects of racism is to investigate the subtle ways in which academic discourse affects the very world it seeks to represent.

Rather than being narrowly confined to theories of biological superiority, racism can be defined more generally as an "attempt by a dominant group to exclude a subordinate group from the material and symbolic rewards of status and power. It differs from other modes of exclusion [such as sexism] in terms of the distinguishing features by which groups are identified for exclusion" (Jackson 1987, 12).

The important identifier of racism in the United States is "white group dominance and the ensuing inequality of the minority position"(van Dijk 1993, 6). The strength of racism to endure is linked to the ease in which historical phenomena (unemployment, crime, high drop-out rates, run-down housing, etc.) are de-historicized and attributed to biology. Alternatively, the same characteristics that are attributed to biology can be credited to culture, in which a groups' culture is interpreted as a monolithic entity that springs forth instinctually. This emphasis on culture-as-nature renders what is historically contingent as "natural" and timeless(Hall 1981), whereby the majority of Whites accept the status quo regarding African-Americans as the best of all possible worlds, if they question the present at all.

The construction of representations in which these hierarchical relationships of unequal power are made to seem like commonsense is a role played primarily by elites within society. Thus, racism is not simply found in the streets or in hateful diatribes but can also be found in the reasoned, articulate talk and text of society's agenda-setters. These elites include, "the politicians of respectable parties, the journalists of our daily newspapers, the writers of the textbooks our children use at school, the well-known scholars who write introductory sociology texts, the personnel managers of leading business companies, and all those who thus manage public opinion, dominant ideologies, and consensual everyday practices" (van Dijk 1993, 8-9).

The elites' role in racism stems from their influence over society's agenda-setting machinery -- various media outlets, political office, corporate policies, and academic journals -- that mediate what is considered for public discussion. These outlets of knowledge inform the ways in which Whites think and talk about the idea of "race" and minorities. In this way, elites provide the conceptual foundations

for racism, such that "the social cognitions that underlie these [racist] practices are largely shaped through discursive communication within the dominant white group. In other words, although discourse is not the only form of racist practice, it nevertheless plays a crucial role in the societal reproduction of the basic mechanisms of most other racist practices" (van Dijk 1993, 13).

THINKING ABOUT REPRESENTING

Focusing on the idea of "race" and how it is thought and spoken about is not simply justified as an activity appropriate to people of good will. That is to say, the sole motivation for studying the representations surrounding both the idea of "race" and African-Americans need not be altruism or a sense of shame on the part of Whites. The idea of "race" is central to the way in which Western societies construct their self identities, their images of Us and Them. "The issue of race provides one of the most important ways of understanding how this society actually works and how it has arrived where it is. It is one of the most important keys, not into the margins of the society, but to its dynamic centre" (Hall 1981, 69).

Furthermore, an emphasis on the construction and power of a discourse is not an arcane pursuit removed from the concerns of everyday experience in the "real" world. In fact the central thesis of this paper is that discourse and representation have dramatic impacts upon the material world. Representations do not obscure some deeper reality so much as they help constitute reality for the culture that produces and consumes them (Gidley 1992, 2). Representations are powerful -- they influence how people make sense of the material world and how they then act upon it. Racism has an impact on the material world as Whites use the discourse about African-Americans, which has been thoroughly influenced by racism (Gossett 1963), to make sense of things they see, create guidelines for institutions, teach their children, interact with other people and a myriad of other practical, everyday events that relate to African-Americans.

For example, European travelers created stories about the "Orient," constructing an image that characterized it as, among other things, mysterious (illogical) and degenerate (anti-Christian). Over time this conception of the Orient, which had little or nothing to do with how Orientals viewed themselves, became "true" in the sense that among Europeans (and some Orientals) these images were the essence of the Orient. But what infused these European conceptions with material implications was the political power Europe wielded over vast colonial empires in Asia and Africa. The hegemonic discourse concerning Asia and Africa was created by an imperial Europe which in turn had the power over a colonized Orient to give these ways of knowing material implications (Said 1978). Thus, what Europe thought (and thinks) about Asia and Africa mattered because of the power Europe possessed.

This dynamic between representation and power is critical to understanding the material ramifications of a social science discourse shot through with racism. Jackson (1987) provides an example of this by discussing the relationship between institutional racism and racist "jokes." Suppose a joke confirms a stereotype of Blacks held by Whites. If, in turn, the Whites who predominate in the managerial ranks of housing agencies and personnel departments, believe that this stereotype is in some way true, this belief may have implications for Black lives. These representations may be made manifest in the form of housing policies that systematically assume that Blacks will want to live among themselves or that they are incapable of taking care of a residence area and therefore should be provided simple, less aesthetically-pleasing domiciles. The joke reinforces stereotypes that are part of the White discourse concerning African-Americans and which may result in the formation of a cognitive basis for racist institutional policies. Something as seemingly innocuous as a joke has material implications for the people who are the butt of it.

THE ACT OF "RE-PRESENTING"

When thinking critically about the act of representing it may be helpful to begin with a very

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basic observation: although people communicate with text and talk, these representations of events and people are not the actual events themselves (Gidley 1992, 1). Representations are "fictions" in the literal sense of the word: they are creations. It might be a worthwhile mental exercise to hyphenate "represent" making it "re-present." Doing so emphasizes the act of interpretation embodied by the word: presenting again. That is to say, what is given to an audience is not the genuine article, so to speak, but rather a re-presentation of what a person saw. Admittedly, this disjuncture between what is observed and what is re-presented is fundamental to everyday life and cannot be avoided. The complexity of the act, however, demands attention.

Some of the complexity stems from the socially-constructed nature of representations. How humans make sense of their world, and in turn represent it to others, is a process mediated by the society they live in. People are taught how to give meaning to what they encounter. The process by which representations are made is governed by the observer's socially-constructed way of understanding. In creating representations, people bring their subjective experiences and knowledges to bear so that what is related to the audience of a film, drama, or geographic journal article is not a transparent mirror image of "reality" but rather a person's creation. Indeed, with respect to academic geography, what was and is presented to its audience are re-presentations filtered through the cognitive lenses of geographers.

In light of the complex nature of the act of representation, asking whether a representation is more or less accurate is not the only question that needs to be asked. If the character of a representation is shaped by the social influences upon its creator (Hartsock 1987), then an inquiry into the aspects of the creator's culture that are displayed in their re-presentations is appropriate. When members of one group observe other cultures, what they report, no matter how intimate they have become with the other culture, will say more about themselves and their assumptions than about the people they were intent on describing (Gidley 1993, 3). The question to ask about material that White social scientists, including geographers, have produced about other groups is, "What does this say about geographers and their way of knowing?" That is to say, in creating images of African-Americans, White social scientists are displaying themselves.

A group of museum curators, each of whom worked at older museums with large ethnographic collections from the colonial era in Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, entitled their annual meeting, "Exhibiting Ourselves" (Gidley 1993, 5). The majority of the meeting was spent discussing the ways in which their collections of material artifacts were indeed displays of the imagined geographies of European perception. These fictions of diorama and curiosity room stand in direct contrast with the ways in which the colonized may have chosen to be known: the display case and lecture series are not the **only** version of how it was. Rather, these re-presentations are indicative of a way of knowing located in a European tradition and, as such, chronicles how Europeans saw it. In the process, the native vision is relegated to the invisible.

REPRESENTATION and RACISM

These observations on representation have serious repercussions for European-American social scientists who endeavor to understand other cultures and then re-present their findings. The White social scientist's position in society as a member of the dominant "race" and class will influence observations in untold ways (Hartsock 1987). Furthermore, the representations that Whites create often help to ensure the continuing hegemony of their class and "race" -- which, in effect, is racist.

The political atmosphere in which White social scientists create representations of African-Americans is marked by a social chasm engendered by the gross disparities in economic and political power between subject and observer. As argued above, this dynamic has implications for the discourse created by Whites about Blacks. The dynamic manifests itself in images of Blacks that

grossly varnish over the need for an individualized and contextualized treatment of social situations in such a manner that a stereotype, "the African-American," (as if a single image was appropriate) emerges (Jackson 1987). There is a propensity among dominant groups to essentialize other groups into stereotypes that caricature and create divisions of the We / They variety. Furthermore, there is a tendency "that the representations ... incorporate, reflect or respond to, perhaps justify, the assumptions of the dominant"(Gidley 1992, 2). As such, what Whites re-present about Blacks cannot be taken at face value but must be interrogated as to the influence of the White position in the social hierarchy versus that of Blacks (Hartsock 1987).

The way things are represented can be used to make exclusionary practices seem legitimate. A discourse that categorizes people in terms of "race" and ascribes certain characteristics to them can result in grave material implications for the group so labeled. At the heart of this process of labeling are discursive practices that promote categories that differentiate between Us and Them, which in turn can lead to the subsequent exclusion of Them. Exclusion requires both control of the discourse by which groups and individuals are labeled and the political power to restrict access to certain goods in society. Most minority-group members do not experience racism through expressions of overt physical violence but rather their everyday knowledge of racism involves insults and institutional practices that exclude them in some way. These events, examples of which include unjust hiring policies, slurs in both private and public communication, exclusive admissions requirements, the criminal justice system, etc., are conditioned by the discourse and impact everyday life. If the White majority can be convinced that the physical and psychological misery that many African-Americans suffer is "natural" or their own doing, there will be very little support for changing this unjust situation -- precisely because most Whites will not conceive of it as unjust.

The 1965 Moynihan Report is an example of the connections between representations and the material world (Ginsburg 1988). "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," was written by a team of social scientists lead by Daniel Patrick Moynihan while he was a bureaucrat in the Labor Department. The confidential briefing claimed that the source of Black misery was not racism, but instead lay within the African-American community itself. The condition of the Black family (as if a single image was appropriate) had degenerated to the point that it was locked in a self-perpetuating "tangle of pathology." The report conceded that although racism continued to be a problem, the fundamental threat to the community was the high incidence of matrifocal families. This condition was so pervasive that it had become part of Black culture and as such locked individual African-Americans into a cycle of poverty. The fundamental nature of Black families stood between them and progress. Thus, assistance from the Federal government should be aimed at strengthening the Black family, rather than ameliorating racism or economic conditions (Rainwater 1967).

The report itself was hailed by the corporate press as accurate and its author as bravely confronting a delicate subject. President Johnson made it the centerpiece of a major policy statement concerning civil rights. The report was leaked to the press just days before Watts went into rebellion, and its "findings" were hailed as providing the perspective needed to understand the causes of the disturbance (Gresham 1989). Moynihan continued to wield influence over African-Americans as a domestic-policy advisor in the Nixon Administration, author, and currently as a United States senator from New York.

Since then, the report has been criticized for, among other things, focusing on females and families to the exclusion of the destructive impact of class and racism (Sherman 1989). Moynihan's characterization of Black communities as a "tangle of pathology" and refusal to ask why Blacks found themselves in such a predicament, furthered a discourse that blamed the victim (Cockburn 1989). It fueled representations that interpreted material conditions among African-Americans as the result of

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dysfunctional personal behaviors and supposed-cultural traits.

All the criticisms, however, have not detracted from the luster of the report. In turn, it has continued to have material implications for African-Americans. Moynihan's theories are given legitimacy by media commentators, politicians, and social scientists alike (Ginsberg 1988). In short, the inequality between Blacks and Whites continues to be interpreted as the result of the "pathological" nature of African-American culture. In a political and intellectual climate conditioned by representations such as these it is impossible to cultivate the political will required to address the root causes behind the continued oppression of African-Americans. The result has been legislation that has assumed a stance of "benign neglect" or has targeted individuals for remedial or coercive attention and a corporate press that contains little or no discussion concerning the impact of "economic crisis, corporate policies, management agendas or their effects on the poor" (Cockburn 1989).

CONCLUSION

As social scientists gaze at the material world, very little self-reflection occurs about the ways in which their relationship with that material world impacts their ability to observe it. To paraphrase from a lecture by Lakshman Yapa on the subject, "it is not as if the social sciences incarnate came bounding over a hill one day and there in the valley lay a material world to investigate." The social sciences have grown out of the same material conditions that they attempt to observe. The implications of this neglected relationship involve the propensity of dominant discourses to become totalizing, in effect, to render invisible other ways of knowing the world.

These observations are intended to further a work-in-progress. By no means are they complete but rather they are offered as justification for a critical reading of geographers and the representations they create. In creating representations of African-Americans, geographers have engaged an Other to which their relationship has been one of political dominance. This hierarchical relationship has implications for the representations they have created and in turn these representations have had ramifications on the material world. My goal in presenting several observations concerning the relationship between the act of representation and the material world has been to lay the groundwork for an investigation into the material implications of the geographic discourse about African-Americans.

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