

“White socio-spatial epistemology”

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“Whiteness, the Moving Signifier traveling the whiteman “relocates” whiteness as the signifier of what is powerful, whole, hopeful and pure.”

Spatial Mobility of Whiteness

In a provocative article investigating the prosaic character of white privilege, McIntosh (1997) notes some of the privileges of whiteness she has experienced. Among them are the following:

It is in this way that mobility—mundane or otherwise—is racialized. A recent advertisement for MasterCard credit cards offers an illustration (see Figure 2). In it, two white men, presumably college students, are overheard contemplating a nighttime road trip in their bohemian sport utility vehicle. Set against the backdrop of the star-encrusted sky and open road, one of them says, ‘Where do you want to go?’, to which the other replies, ‘I don’t know, where do you want to go?’ The caption across the bottom of the page reads: ‘MasterCard. Accepted wherever you end up’. The scene calls forth classic images of carefree adventure associated with the road trip, that particularly American coming-of-age ritual. The easy assumption of mobility and the promise of easy acceptance (both social and fiduciary), marks MasterCard’s two travelers as privileged, and, along with their classed and gendered identities, codes the escapade as ‘fun’.

The image of carefree travel, however, raises the question, for whom is travel play, and for whom is travel better understood by making reference to its shared etymological roots with travail, to toil and labor, to suffer? The latter is the sense that emerges from bell hooks’ persuasive rendering of black travel as an encounter with the terror of moving through places that whites have claimed as their own (1991, 1992; see also Curtis 1997). The situation of the white road-trippers stands in marked contrast to the experience of black travelers for whom travel is often a dangerous undertaking, fraught with uncertainty and the uneasy knowledge that one may not be ‘accepted wherever you end up’. The long history of segregated travel, with its distinctly separate and unequal services, as well as contemporary incidences of police harassment associated with racial proling (‘driving-while-black’), testify to the array of threats that attend to racialized

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I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race [sic] most of the time. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen. (1997: 293–234)

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This list invokes mobility through such questions as: 'Who can go where?' and 'When can they go there?' Whereas whites may consider McIntosh's encounters to be mundane, for those marked as Other, they carry the constant threat of psychic or physical violence. Clearly, one's experience with such events are conditioned by the racialized social order, but they also rely on a non-relational understanding of subjectivity. Those with whom McIntosh inter-acts construct her essentially, using her white body as a guarantee of her White Identity. Even in cases in which mobility can be linked to transgression and an engagement with the Other (e.g. Cresswell 1993; Jones forthcoming; McDowell 1996), the question 'For whom?' is always at the surface of the marked body's skin colour. Figure 2 'MasterCard. Accepted wherever you end up'.

Others when moving through white spaces: suspicion, surveillance, harassment and assault. By hooks' telling, places are far from neutral or empty containers. Rather, they can be charged with white supremacy and are co-constitutive in its production. Writing about the travails associated with the journey she and her siblings would make through a white neigh-

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On the way to her grandparent's house, she recalled:

I remember the fear ... because we would have to pass that terrifying whiteness —those white faces on the porches staring us down with hate. Even when empty or vacant those porches seemed to say danger, you do not belong here, you are not safe. (1991: 41)

Hooks' reading of even the 'empty or vacant' porches suggests a relational micro-geography: exposed on the empty street, vulnerable to surveillance by the white ocular gaze, the children had to pass through a gauntlet of houses whose inhabitants considered them to be out of place (see Cresswell 1996). Some whites are quick to state that they do not feel safe moving through black neighbourhoods, the implication being that they too are marginalized.

The fact remains, however, that whereas most whites can avoid these places, thanks to limited-access highways and segregated neighbourhoods, no such opportunity exists for people of colour moving through the residential and commercial spaces of the USA. By linking terror with something so necessary as spatial mobility, McIntosh and hooks point toward the pervasive embeddedness of whiteness, demonstrating how, for those who are named as Other—by the police when pulled over for speeding or by teachers in a hallway—whiteness is about who is able to monitor the social spaces of travel.

Conclusion

A recent article by Kobayashi and Peake (2000) extends Bonnett's (1997) call for geographic research on whiteness. Arguing for more work on strategies of resistance, they sketch an agenda that seeks to make antiracist struggle more effective by taking into account the myriad geographic sites at which whiteness operates: in boardrooms, streets and in classrooms. Equally important, they elaborate a political agenda focused on the discipline. Noting that our disciplinary

history is 'one of near silence on issues of racialization, silence based on an almost overwhelming inattention to the details of racial practice, a silence, in other words, dominated by whiteness' (Kobayashi and Peake 2000: 399; see also Dwyer 1997), they go on to note how mainstream spatiality is complicit with whiteness, and to suggest how geographers should respond:

The preoccupation with space ... often reacts the modern concept of territoriality and the positioning of dominant groups, instead of recognizing that such outcomes are deeply implicated in the rationale of a spatial organization of society based on Enlightenment notions of imperial civilization. Part of the agenda for the new millennium, therefore, must be the pressing need to make considerations of racialization a fundamental aspect of geographical understanding, in much the same way that more and more geographers have recognized that no human geography is complete without a consideration of gender. (2000: 399)

In elaborating a set of socio-spatial concepts that service whiteness, and in briefly drawing connections between them and social practices and spaces, this paper is an attempt to contribute to such an agenda. We have drawn the contours of a non-relational social and spatial epistemology, one whose fragmentations and segmentations are not simply 'caused' by whiteness, but which can be marshaled in support of it. This marshalling of epistemology becomes socio-spatial practice, deeply embedded in the hovering silence of white identity, in the historical and contemporary forms of ocularcentrism, and in the distancing and segmentations of white space. Though, as Bonnett (1997) argues, there exist many forms of whiteness, distinguished historically and geographically, it is our view that they share a common, non-relational, approach to knowing the world. This view is consistent with Bonnett's inasmuch as various forms of whiteness can differentially tap a rich epistemological terrain.

It follows that geographers attempting to overturn whiteness might well begin with an analysis of the forms of knowledge underwriting social practices and social spaces. Inasmuch as geography has contributed to those forms of thought, the discipline is complicit in these practices and spaces. A politics working in opposition to this epistemology of self-assertion and segmentation would thus pose challenging questions to the white centre: 'Who has the power to organize alterity into difference, and difference into identities?' 'How does this process vary historically and geographically?' 'Who is socially and spatially excluded in this process, and with what effects?' 'And, how can the security of white identities and spaces be deconstructed, destabilized and undermined?' Clearly these are only parts of an anti-racist political agenda, one that needs to operate on many levels. But by drawing attention to epistemology, we hope to connect theory and practice in ways that work on both the discipline and white society more generally.

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