

Racing geography into the new millennium: studies of 'race' and North American geographies

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Introduction

There appears to be a renaissance regarding questions of 'race' and racism within geography in general, and within North American geography in particular. While matters of 'race' have always been central to the practice of geographical scholarship, whether explicitly foregrounded or not,¹ the past ten years have seen a burgeoning engagement with racialized geographies linking geographic research with issues more widely extant in social science literatures. This special issue of *Social and Cultural Geography* presents seven empirically focused examples of recent research on 'race' being undertaken in North America by geographers and others sympathetic to an analysis predicated upon a socio-spatial dynamic.² While not presented as a comprehensive survey or synopsis of the broad range of geographic research on 'race' and racism currently underway, we hope nevertheless to contribute to the renaissance, highlighting some important research questions, themes and points of connection among geographers, as well as to researchers in cognate fields. Very briefly, then,

this introduction to the collection will elaborate the immediate context or background that produced the following essays, before enumerating the salient themes to be found within their empirical specificity.

Context for this special issue

The impetus for this collection came most directly from a three-day workshop on 'race' and geography held at the University of Kentucky in the autumn of 1998 and funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF).³ Approximately thirty scholars—the majority geographers but with several from cognate disciplines—with active research programmes in 'race' and geography gathered to share observations, convictions and ideas about future research directions, including the possibility for collaborative projects. While it was perhaps impossible to include all scholars working on 'race' and racism in geography, the workshop attempted to invite or solicit input from as broad a range of geographers as possible. In

addition to their research agendas, participants were chosen based on criteria of methodological diversity, career stage (with an active attempt to invite graduate students), geographic location and their ability to join the workshop. The workshop contained four explicit objectives: to demarcate issues for further study, as well as invite individuals to start investigations in an attempt to re-ignite research on 'race' in a North American context; to cultivate cross-disciplinary research by inviting scholars from related disciplines whose work is fundamentally geographic; to seek publishing venues for workshop outcomes⁴; and to increase minority presence in the discipline especially by promoting the activities of students. In keeping with this normative blend of intellectual and disciplinary objectives, the three-day workshop variously ranged from small group discussions/working groups focused on future research agendas to full group, far-ranging debates and arguments over the place of the discipline in racist socio-spatial practice within and beyond the walls of the academy.

The issues and concerns of the workshop participants mirrored and, in part, constitute a far-ranging resurgence of social, political and academic attention to 'race' and racism in North America. The NSF workshop followed an American Sociological Association interdisciplinary conference devoted to research on 'race' and racism in the USA organized under the auspices of President Clinton's 'One America' Initiative. The Association of American Geographers was represented at that conference, and geographic research on race in a US context was entered into the record through a report prepared by Jan Kodras.⁵ Similar, broad-ranging governmental and societal concern for 'race' and racism can be seen in the Canadian context with the federal initiative of Metropolis, the Canadian component of a glo-

bal research programme on immigrants and cities. Because of these somewhat similar concerns across the US/Canadian border, and because of the close affinities of much geographic research in the USA and Canada, additional funding was sought, and obtained, from the Canadian Embassy in order to ensure a 'Canadian presence' at the workshop.⁶

Racialized geographies

Within North American geography, a significant number of scholars have joined a small cadre of long-standing practitioners in refocusing significant attention on 'race' and racism. Two recent bibliographic essays—one emphasizing contemporary work, the other an historiographic account—outline, at least for the USA, the explicit attention paid to 'race' in a geographic context (Kodras 1998; Dwyer 1997).⁷ After little direct engagement with issues of 'race' for much of the twentieth century, North American geographers in the 1960s became involved primarily through research on (if only occasionally *by*) African Americans. Linked to social movements such as Civil Rights activism, the geographic turn to socially relevant and radical geographies coupled with geography's then-dominant spatial analytic research paradigm, was noted at the time by Deskins (1969) and subsequently remarked upon by Dwyer (1997: 446), who identified the trend as 'a distinct break with past research'. He notes that the new research focused especially upon African American residence areas and voting districts, and cites essays such as Morrill's (1965) study of Seattle's ghetto, Lewis' (1965) inquiry into spatial voting patterns in Flint, Michigan, and Rose's (1970) investigation of Milwaukee's ghetto as indicative of 'a new era of geographic research' and 'the first sustained engagement on the part of

geographers with African Americans'. Three general research topics originating in that era persist to the present day, and they can be broadly identified as: spatial distribution and interaction, especially in relation to patterns and processes of residential segregation and racialized migration flows; economic and social issues, including debates on spatial mismatch, labour market participation, poverty and the so-called urban 'underclass'; and political participation, particularly in the realms of electoral geographies, civil rights and affirmative action.

In addition to embracing these relatively long-standing (and primarily empiricist) geographic research traditions, contemporary geographic literature also has engaged the broad-ranging concerns of critical 'race' theory which generally challenges the essentialized given of a biologically determined racialized categorization in favour of the social (and political and economic and cultural) processes of *racialization* (see, e.g., Delgado 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 1997). Critical 'race' theorists have convincingly argued that the belief that 'race' is a biological category, i.e. that human beings can be divided into discrete social groupings called races on the basis of phenotypic features, is an unacceptable avenue of inquiry.⁸ Hence the practice of writing the term 'race' in quotes, to indicate its social construction. However, to claim that race has no biological underpinnings is not to argue that racialization, 'the representational process whereby social significance is attached to certain biological and/or cultural characteristics' (Walter 1999a: 226), and racism, the systematic attachment of beliefs of inferiority to people of colour, are not real. Indeed, they have specific material and ideological effects that vary over time and space. As Kobayashi and Peake (1994: 234) underscore, it is the '*contingency* of biological categories which are chosen according

to social and cultural criteria in specific material circumstances' which suggests that 'race' is a geographical and historical construct whose specificity and effects must be named.

Given that the socially constructed status of the concept of 'race' is now widely accepted, what is the main task facing theorists of 'race' today? Winant (1994: 14) claims it 'is to focus attention on the *continuing significance and changing meaning of race*'. Omi and Winant (1994: vii) argue that we must understand how concepts of 'race' are created, how they are embedded in political conflict, and how they have (in this case) permeated US society. They call for a fuller understanding of racialized concepts, in part, because of their role 'in shaping the very geography of American life ...'. It is geographers, however, such as Delaney, who have emphasized the other side of the coin, i.e. that ' "race"... *is what it is and does what it does* precisely because of *how* it is given spatial expression' (Delaney 1998a: 18). The latter is a point that geographers working in this field have been at pains to expand upon, highlighting the mutual construction of racialized identities and place. Indeed, critical geographers interested in the debates over the social construction of 'race' and its attendant processes of racialization are positing a dialectical position. Geographers (re)asserting the role of space/place in critical social theory (Soja 1989) have joined scholars across disciplines—in cultural studies, social theory, anthropology, gender studies, sociology, literary criticism, labour history, post-colonial studies, among them—to explore the social construction, contestation and negotiation of ethnic and racialized identities especially as grounded in place and across spatial scales.

In addition to opening new corridors of interdisciplinary understanding based, in part, upon a particularly geographic perspective, the recent engagement by geographers with 'race'

and racism also has bridged the oceanic divides, bringing into closer conceptual affinity geographers in, at least, Britain, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.⁹ Perhaps the first widely accessible book-length treatments of 'race' and geography in this genre were edited collections, including *Race and Racism* (Jackson 1987), *Constructions of Race, Place, and Nation* (Jackson and Penrose 1993) and *Racism, the City and the State* (Cross and Keith 1993). While it is not possible here to trace the subsequent manifestations of this critical turn in such far-flung geographic literatures, throughout the 1990s there has been building within the North American context a number of sophisticated book-length treatments of 'race' and racism which might serve as entry points into the burgeoning literature in the US and Canadian contexts. David Delaney (1998b), for example, has traced the centrality of geography in constituting 'race' in the USA, especially through geographies of power as captured in practices of formal legal argument and judgment. The vast majority of studies, however, have focused their attention on one specific place. Kay Anderson's (1991) study of Vancouver's Chinatown traces the material evolution of ethnicity and ethnic enclaves in Vancouver from nineteenth-century origins through the changing discursive constructions of a racialized group in the twentieth century. Also Laura Pulido's (1996) work, broadly construed within an emerging interdisciplinary focus on environmental racism, explores two social and environmental struggles in California through the lens of subaltern studies in order to 'explicitly locate environmental concerns within the context of inequality and attempts to alter dominant power arrangements' (p. xv). A number of works have focused their attention on the South. Clyde Woods' (1998) work on institutionalized racism in the Mississippi Delta and the 'transcendent

social agenda inherent in the blues tradition' (p. 208) takes us beyond stereotypical representations of African Americans as impoverished victims of racist economic development programmes while Aiken's (1998) work on the cotton plantation demonstrates its persistence as a socio-spatial form, and focuses upon the relationship of African Americans to that form in the post-Civil War period. Bobby Wilson's two recent works link 'race' and capitalist development from a slave mode of production to Fordist and entrepreneurial regimes in Birmingham, Alabama (Wilson 2000a), as well as exploring the Civil Rights and neighbourhood movements in Birmingham from a perspective of racialized identity politics (Wilson 2000b). Additionally, there have been a number of recent doctoral dissertations on 'race' and geography, including those by Derek Alderman (1998), Samuel Dennis (2000), Owen Dwyer (2000), Ruthie Gilmore (1998), Wei Li (1997), Heather Merrill-Carter (1999) and Joseph Nevins (1999).

Contributions and themes

The essays that follow draw upon this developing literature and, variously and in concert, bring to our attention some important new avenues of inquiry. For example, it is clear that early engagement with 'race', especially in a US context, was reliant solely upon a black-white binary, reflecting in part the predominance of that binary in defining a fundamental tension in the history of the country. Recent demographic as well as intellectual shifts in this latest era of globalization have challenged that binary, not in order to deny its utility, but to open up our understanding of racialization processes to include both broader ranges and a more closely nuanced concept of racialized and ethnic categorization. Two of the authors, Susan Mains

and Patricia Zavella, disrupt the black–white binary that dominates understandings of ‘race’ in the US by highlighting distinct regional geographies of racialized groups, both focusing on the placement of Latin Americans in the North American imaginary. Mains’ study of racialized representations of Mexican immigrants in Southern California examines how the constructions of ‘race’ and ethnicity adopted by community organizations have worked to transform notions of American borders and identities while Zavella traces how the changing settlement geographies and histories of Latinos are transforming our understandings of regional racialized geographies in the USA.

Laura Liu and Mark Ellis probe how this divide is complicated through immigration processes. Ellis discusses how late twentieth-century changes in immigration patterns have led to localized patterns of increased intermarriage in areas of new immigration. The consequences of these developments have been played out at the national level, with pressure being put on the US Census Bureau from groups in these areas to change the way in which it counts responses to questions on racial origin(s). Indeed, he argues that the debate over how to count racialized origins is inextricably related to debates over the consequences of immigration and struggles over the racialized representation of the national imaginary. Laura Liu also explores the way in which changes in immigration patterns have changed the balance of racialized groups. She argues strongly that when studies of ‘race’ and racism explicitly take immigration into account then the consequences for the study of, for example, labour markets and residential segregation, are far-reaching, opening up the weakness of conceptual models that fail to take into account questions of scale in the construction of racialized differences.

The mutual constitution of space and subjectivities is well rehearsed in the geographic literature, but less so in relation to ‘race’.

In this issue, a number of the authors address the varied meanings attached to ‘race’ and racism in different spaces and places and over different geographic contexts. Within the urban arena Steven Holloway examines residential segregation and racialized discrimination in mortgage lending, arguing for fine-grained analyses of ‘race’ and urban arenas that take into account the mutual and dialectical relation between identity and the contingency of place. Owen Dwyer and John Paul Jones III specifically focus on discursive formations of space, stressing the complex and interlocking relations between scale, boundaries and, what they refer to as ‘extensivity’, that is ‘distance, direction, connectivity and mobility’. Their analytical framework reveals how dominant white groups can safely occupy unmarked and supposedly universal positions, whilst people of colour, regardless of their positioning, are continually brought up against their racialized identities, regarded with antipathy and subject to terror (see Walter 1999b). Katherine McKittrick takes a somewhat less categorical approach to the black diaspora of Canada, the point from which she explores the constitution of black womanhood in the ‘New World’. Drawing on the poetry and criticism of Marlene Nourbese Philip, ‘an African Caribbean poet residing in Canada’, she explores how her engagement with multiple geographic contexts, from the intimacy of black women’s bodies to a framework of ‘anywhereness’ and of displacement, unsettles understandings of the connections between racialized identities and, in this case, the geographical and historical importance of blackness.

While McKittrick probes the meanings and constitution of blackness, increasingly, geographers working in the field of anti-racist geography have turned their attention to ‘whiteness’

(see, e.g., Bonnett 1997; Kobayashi and Peake 2000). Owen Dwyer and John Paul Jones III make an important contribution to this emerging literature with their interrogation of whiteness as a socio-spatial *epistemology*, that is, 'as a particular way of knowing and valuing social life'. They argue that 'whiteness' is predicated upon an essentialist and non-relational construction of both space and identity, the implications of which are manifested in historically and geographically specific forms and which they explore in relation to studies of residential segregation and spatial mobility.

The interrogation of the constituent dimensions of racialized identities is a theme taken up by Liu, McKittrick and Zavella, specifically in relation to gender. Liu provides a case study of the gendered dynamics of Chinese immigration patterns arguing that patterns of Chinese immigrant women's labour confirm the continuation of gendered niche economies and of explicitly racialized and gendered state policies regarding women's labour. Zavella also argues for a reading of gendered inequalities across Latino/a groups to demonstrate how occupational segregation and experiences of poverty vary within racialized ethnic groups. McKittrick illustrates how the black diasporic female subject in North America and the New World understands and navigates geography. Although she is concerned to link the experiences of black women in the New World to their gendered subjugation under racist patriarchies, she also delineates the different ways unique positionalities foster subjective interpretations of space, place and the body.

A further theme connects 'race' with literatures of the body, with a focus upon the racialized body as a space of representation (Mains, McKittrick). McKittrick draws on the rich vein of studies of the body and the bodily to 'redraw the place of femininity, black womanhood, race and nation(s), in modernity'. To make explicit

the links between identity, place and geography she draws on bodily narratives that are, 'on the one hand, diasporic/imaginary/historical, and on the other hand, indicative of the restrictive limitations fuelled by gender and other social differences'. These narratives are contextualized within spatial conceptualizations of blackness which highlight the contradictory positionality of blackness and of the racialized tropes that issue from the body. Mains frames her study of Mexican immigrants in the south-eastern USA within an analysis of bodily anatomy, highlighting the specific ways in which immigrant bodies have been racialized within a medicalized discourse that serves to restrict movement, most specifically specifying the sites in which immigrant bodies can and cannot be placed. Various other markers of difference—language, skin colour and vision—are also explored in an attempt to uncover how Latinos' geographies are being monitored and controlled.

Two of the papers, by Ellis and Holloway, make inroads into the tricky area of 'race' and statistics/quantitative analysis. As Peake and Kobayashi (forthcoming) claim, 'Numbers represent a genuine dilemma, in that the creation of "racial" categories is a form of essentialism, and can impose a stasis upon those categories, and therefore upon the lives of racialized people. Reduction to numbers also negates the historical and geographical specificity of their lives ... From a more practical perspective, numbers (and the statistical analyses they make possible) are an essential tool in policy analysis and in the application of social programmes'. This latter point is drawn upon by Holloway who addresses the conceptual concerns of conducting quantitative research with data sets that have already constructed 'race' around *a priori* 'objective' categories. He critiques mainstream analyses of urban-based issues that fail to take into account the subjective processes of

identity formation and the contingency of place and urges the use of multifocal methodologies as a way of counting without essentializing and of erasing the divide between quantitative and critical research. Ellis also considers the politics of counting, outlining the various consequences of the recent decision to allow US citizens to give multiple responses to questions relating to racial origin in the 2000 Census, as well as the geographical implications of the different counting systems that are to be used.

Finally, in a vein that heeds the urgent call of Adrienne Rich (1983), all of the contributions speak of the need to critically examine the politics of racialized location in North America. Zavella, Liu and Mains, for example, all make explicit their concern with the politicization of immigrant groups and their struggles for justice, with Zavella and Liu giving particular emphasis to the feminization of poverty within racialized ethnic groups. Ellis expresses his hope that multiple 'race' responses on the US Census will eventually rid the USA of its racialized hierarchy by undermining the myth of 'racial' purity embodied in fixed and mutually exclusive categories. Meanwhile, Dwyer and Jones III make a call for an anti-racist agenda which can aid the deconstruction of discourses of 'the people' that underpin popular conceptions of the American polity and which affect 'domains as diverse as immigration, law enforcement, zoning and neighbourhood segregation, education and health care, and the constitution of public space and housing'. Holloway's concern is also with the resulting urban geographies of inequality that arise from differential access by racialized groups and the need for non-essentialized treatments of their underlying processes to allow geographers to make more meaningful interjections into policies. Finally, McKittrick troubles the very understanding of a North American context, and hints at the uncharted geographies

into which a critical perspective on 'race' and an explicit anti-racist agenda can lead the discipline.

Coda

When the NSF/Canadian Embassy workshop was first conceived, the organizers attempted, among other criteria, to capture a breadth of methodological diversity in the participants attending—and by this was meant epistemological difference as well as simply people employing different techniques or tools of geographic scholarship. We fully anticipated that part of the workshop would be spent attempting to 'bridge the divide' between the more empiricist and spatial analytic traditions, and those scholars engaged in post-empiricist methodologies, including critical 'race' theory, feminist theories, considerations of post-coloniality, and so on. Similarly, we imagined a dichotomy amongst the participants between those claiming a more 'scholarly' (i.e. 'apolitical') concern for questions of 'race' and geography and those whose scholarship was inseparable from their social activism (i.e. for whom the personal, the political and the academic were one). We were wrong in both of these imaginings. Although the workshop participants did indeed employ a broad range of social science techniques for answering (and asking) their scholarly questions, all were concerned to take seriously the 'de-essentializing' of the categories of 'race' and ethnicity that currently prevails across social science and humanities disciplines. To be sure, some were indeed struggling with how they might maintain a focus upon and treatment of several traditional geographic considerations of 'race' while incorporating the potentially radicalizing insights to be gleaned from critical 'race' theory and attendant concerns for the social construction of 'race' and socio-spatial-

historical processes of racialization. Similarly, the imagined dichotomy between scholarly theory and practice was fissiparous on our part. All of the participants, in effect, were concerned that their work respond and contribute to wider discourses about race, racism and racialization within and without the academy. This meant, ultimately, engaging the academy—and specifically the discipline of geography and its own historiography and historical geographies—as not something somehow divorced from the exigencies of ‘race’ in contemporary USA and Canada, but as itself thoroughly racialized: internally, in its external social relations and in the manner in which the discipline has been and continues to be implicated through its scholarship in (hegemonically white) racial formations in everyday political, economic, social and cultural practice, whether consciously or not.

Perhaps this generally common ground was simply the (unconscious) result of participant selection. Perhaps it represents a threshold moment wherein the corpus of geographic scholarship on ‘race’ has critically engaged the wider literatures of the social sciences, a part of the discipline’s re-assertion of place, space and landscape as central to understanding everyday life. And perhaps it is in response to the urgency of engaging in racialization processes and anti-racist practices in this latest round of globalization. While it is now a cliché to speak of the increasing multi-cultural foundations of the USA and Canada, and to invoke recent demographic shifts that, in part, are challenging the *status quo* in both countries, they are very real shifts, and very real challenges which demand the attention of geographers.

Whatever the cause, the simple fact that some common ground for geographic scholarship on ‘race’ and racism in the USA and Canada exists allows us to transcend methodological in-fighting, or seemingly endless debates

about theory and practice and the place of academic scholarship in the ‘real world’, and suggests that there is emerging a new set of conversations about ‘race’, racism and geography. Those new conversations appear ready to conceptually and theoretically adopt the nuances of re-invigorated scholarship on ‘race’ in a North American context, at least. That means moving beyond (while not abandoning the structuring importance of) the black–white binary, engaging trans-disciplinary literatures on ‘race’ and racism, and re-asserting the place of a geographic perspective and understanding in racial formations and racialization processes. In order to help carry on those conversations, the following essays attempt some empirical grounding of the more general themes discussed herein. They are not meant as the last word, nor as the first, simply as part of a refusal to allow the important questions of ‘race’, racism and geography to languish.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, Livingstone (1992) and Thomas (1998).
- 2 While we focus specifically on studies from the USA and Canada, we recognize the fluidity of national boundaries for academic researchers, many of whom are often integrated into transnational research networks leading to a cross-fertilization of theoretical frameworks and analytical concerns. However, all the contributions in this issue are characterized by their empirical setting in a North American context.
- 3 NSF grant number SBR 9810655.
- 4 This special issue obviously reflects that objective, as does a complementary issue of *The Professional Geographer* (forthcoming) which contains essays drawn from workshop participants that are more theoretical, conceptual or prescriptive in nature. Other articles from the workshop have also been published in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (2000).
- 5 Copies of the report (Kodras 1998a) can be obtained from Rich Schein at the University of Kentucky.
- 6 Canadian Embassy, Canadian Studies Conference Grant Program 1998–99.

- 7 This brief encapsulation of geographic research on 'race' is drawn from these two sources, as well as from the original NSF workshop proposal (and from that proposal we are grateful for the insights and contributions especially of Owen Dwyer, John Paul Jones III and Jan Kodras).
- 8 This is not to distract attention from the fact that there is still an audience for the essentialist arguments postulated in the latest work by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, authors of *The Bell Curve* (1994).
- 9 Geographers working on issues of 'race' in the South and studies of racialized groups in the South are virtually non-existent but see Peake and Trotz (1999) who explore how the reproduction of racialized identities among Guyanese women relies on gendered practices and representations that are constituted and challenged across a number of sites, entwining the local and the global.

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Abstract translations

Racont géographie dans le nouveau millenium: études de 'race' et géographies nord-américaines

Ce travail sert d'introduction aux articles qui composent ce numéro spécial du Journal de géographie sociale et culturelle sur les études de 'race' et géographies nord-américaines. Nous traçons le contexte d'où ces travaux ont émergé—un atelier spécial organisé par le département de Géographie de l'Université du Kentucky—suivi d'une brève revue de l'évolution des études portant sur la 'race' au vingtième siècle. Le texte se termine par une évaluation des thèmes majeurs explorés dans les travaux ici rassemblés afin d'illustrer la diversité des études empiriques contemporaines sur la 'race' et le racisme en géographie et autres disciplines reliées.

Mots clefs: race, racisme, géographie, Amérique du Nord, géographies racialisées.

Raza geográfica entrando al nuevo Milenio: el estudio geográfico de raza en Norte America

Este trabajo sirve como introducción a los trabajos que lo siguen en esta edición especial de la Revista de Geografía Social y Cultural sobre investigaciones de 'raza' y geografías norteamericanas. Explicamos resumidamente los contextos de los que surgen estos trabajos—un taller especialmente organizado en el Departamento de Geografía de la Universidad de Kentucky—y seguimos con una breve perspectiva general de la evolución de los estudios sobre la 'raza' en la geografía del siglo veinte. El trabajo termina con una evaluación de los temas principales examinados en el trabajo siguiente para ilustrar la diversidad de los estudios contemporáneos de foco empírico sobre 'raza' y racismo elaborados por geógrafos y aquellos de disciplinas afines.

Palabras claves: 'raza', racismo, geografía, America del Norte, geografías racializadas.