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Geographies of race and ethnicity I: Black geographies

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Abstract

This first of three progress reports gives a brief overview of the new field of Black Geographies. It elucidates Black Geographies as a field that not only critiques the erasure of Blackness within the whiteness and coloniality of geographical thought, but also centres Black spatial thought and agency. Thus, Black Geographies is an im/possible undertaking. Nonetheless, Black Geographies speaks not only about the spatialities of Black people but overwhelmingly speaks from the voices of Black geographers: Geography will need to recruit and retain enough Black geographers to make such an undertaking truly possible.

Keywords

Black Geographies, postcolonial, anti-colonial, intersectionality, marginalisation

I Introduction: mapping Black Geographies

For this first of three reports on Race and Ethnicity in Geography, I want to begin with one of the most significant moves in the last 5 years – the inception of the field of Black Geographies, written largely (though not exclusively) by Black¹ geographers. As Patricia Price (2011, 2013, 2015), Laura Pulido (2015, 2017, 2018), and Anne Bonds (2018, 2020) have all shown before me, Geographies of Race and Ethnicity have been largely focused on geographical knowledge that bears witness to the spatialities of coloniality and exclusion based on race and ethnicity. However, in large part, such spatialised exclusion rests on the exclusionary foundations of (post)colonial formations of geographical knowledge, which are themselves reproduced through exclusionary conditions of geographical knowledge production (see, for example, Clement, 2020; Wang, 2021). So, this report's focus is on Black Geographies' mission

not only to catalogue exclusion but also to critique exclusionary logics and conditions of knowledge production. The newness of Black Geographies, centring the work of Black² geographers without excluding relevant work of other geographers, appears potentially revolutionary in challenging the exclusionary conditions of geographical knowledge production, due to which Black geographers remain a relatively small group (Byron, 2020; Desai, 2017; Hawthorne and Heitz, 2018; Okoye, 2021a). But Black geographers are growing in number and contribution globally, and my plan for this and the next two reports is to consider the consequences of that growth in embodied diversity for geographical knowledge.

This paper begins a mapping of the complex spatialities of the emerging Black Geographies

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literature. My aim here is not to set out what Black Geography's agendas should be in the future, nor even to point out what are its current gaps. I elucidate Black Geographies' central concerns as twofold: around Geography's anti-Black histories, spatial logics and conditions of knowledge production; and around how those disciplinary logics both determine and are effectively resisted by the space- and place-making agency of Black thought and communities. In other words, Black Geographies frame Black spatialities as always im/possible: always erased and yet always present. My aim therefore is to consider how those same logics and historical/contemporary conditions of knowledge production are inevitably shaping the emergence of Black Geographies. Predictably, Black Geographies so named are rooted in the powerful epicentre of US-focused Black knowledge production and are routing outwards from there to other centres of Black community. At the same time, Black Geographies' own anti-colonial and anti-racist logics always already resist and de-centre this powerful US epicentering, re-reading Black Geographies as rooted in/routed through a more globalised and diverse vision of Blackness. I end by suggesting that the historical and contemporary conditions of Black thought, out of which Black Geographies grows, have been necessarily more globalised and less bound by academic confines. Thus, the future spatialities of Black Geographies are much less predictable.

II The im/possibility of Black Geographies

I want to start by acknowledging that Black Geographies actually is focused on African-American Geographies as its starting point. In making this heuristic move, I am beginning with a somewhat reductive version of what Black Geographies is. In contrast to Hawthorne (2019), who is rightly keen to emphasise its antecedents and connections, rather than beginning by tracing its routes and futures into its myriad transnational ties with an anti-colonial Black politics that echoes through from Black Freedom Fighters, fugitives and intellectuals in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and Europe (see

for example James 1998; Mudimbe, 1988; Rhodes 2021), in this section I am confining Black Geographies to 'Black Geographies' so named. In asserting that Black Geographies is definitively African-American in origin, I am locating its starting point in the considerable labours of Black geographers in the US, particularly women like LaToya Eaves, who pushed successfully for an *institutional* recognition that takes its most visible form in the Black Geographies Specialty Group, formed in 2016, at the American Association of Geographers (Hawthorne, 2019).

As an institutionalised field so named, Black Geographies begins in the Americas. That beginning gives some very clear agendas and formations to Black Geographies, which are key to the challenge that it poses to Geography as a postcolonial white discipline. Black Geographies deliberately centres the locations and spatialities that condition and determine Black lives in the post-enslavement Americas – the plantation (McKittrick, 2011), the prison (Gilmore, 2007), urban built environments (Shabazz, 2015), and the post-segregation agricultural landscape of the American South (Bledsoe et al., 2017; Harris and Hyden, 2017). Black Geographies critiques and catalogues the many ways in which Black lives have been shaped by the spatial logics and conditions of colonialism, enslavement and white supremacy under the unequal environmental and territorial conditions of racial capitalism (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019b; Pulido 2016). At the same time, the long tradition of radical Black and anti-colonial thought and action is also a defining spatial force. Therefore, canonical Black intellectuals, from Africa, the Caribbean and Canada as well as from the US, are key to theorising the geographies of Black experience. Du Bois's (1897) 'double consciousness' is a key interdisciplinary referent, for example (Brand, 2018), in describing the im/possibility of Black intellectual life, how we live in and contend with 'the wake' (Sharpe, 2016) of colonial legacies and systems of thought (Mbembe, 2017; Wynter, 2003); whilst marronage is a key framework for understanding how we resist coloniality and find forms of critical agency that can challenge this all-encompassing system and work in concord with Black humanity (Bledsoe et al., 2017; Purifoy 2021).

Centring Black life *and* thought, together, is crucial. Or, in the words of Frank Wilderson (cited in Park, 2020, p. 31, my emphasis) ‘what does blackness *mean* as opposed to what does blackness *experience*?’ The historical and contemporary exclusions of Black knowledges in white-dominated global knowledge regimes mean that Black thought is always subject to omission and erasure. Under these conditions, the foundational colonial missions of Geography – to explore and map out the world within the extractivist and exploitative logics of colonial and capitalist regimes (Crampton and Krygier, 2006; de Leeuw and Hunt, 2018) – would seem to make Black Geographies a contradiction in terms. Similar to the critique of Geography’s premature moves to decolonise (Esson et al., 2017), it might be argued that the discipline is not yet ready to include Black Geographies. Black Geographies grow under im/possible conditions. The historical dispossession of Black geographers within a (post)colonial discipline is in tension with the de facto agency of Black communities to make space and to be in place – as embodied human beings Black people are always making place and taking up space, theorising it as we live it, whilst always at the same time being erased from documented spatial knowledge and from the ownership of place (McKittrick, 2006). Under conditions of knowledge production where subject positions are often listed but enunciative positions are still rarely analysed (Rose, 1997), McKittrick (2011: 948) pays attention to ‘a paradoxical preoccupation with the suffering/violated black body and the stubborn denial of a black sense of place’ – the erasure of Black spatial practice and of Black thought about space often becomes the impossible starting point for discussion of Black spatialities.

By centring Black spatial thought, rather than just noting its erasure, one of the most radical effects of Black Geographies might be to finally move Geography away from its postcolonial liberal impulse to try to include Black geographers in dialogue only on its own exclusionary terms (Hawthorne and Heitz, 2018). Instead, Black Geographies might push the discipline towards a historical moment in which ‘an ethical analytics of race [is] based not on suffering, but on human life’ (McKittrick, 2011: 948), or

towards a deepening in the terms of engagement that recognises that our entirety, *all* that we are, both what Geography can read as human and what it can’t, is also human. But focusing on the entirety of Black spatial thought brings us to the heart of im/possibility: if Geography is founded on the erasure of Black spatial thought – how else could colonialism take places? – centring Black spatial thought means radically rethinking how Geography understands space, place and spatial agency. A starting point for such a reimagining has been marronage or Maroon geographies, with its historical basis in Black people fleeing enslavement and living outside the bounds of whiteness, making places in unsurveilled territories in which ‘residents reject the logics of racial violence that structure the world around them’ (Winston 2021: 2187). The im/possible history of voluntary Black separatism and community-making has often been one of repetitive displacement (Ramírez, 2020), but Winston (2021) helpfully thinks through how Maroon geographies can also be understood as finding ways to stay in place, through forms of communal living in which shared property is defended by the whole community, and property owners fly under the radar of white surveillance by, for example, refusing to file deeds to their properties. These practices lead to a theorisation of place that is not just communal but is *relational* – rather than theorising place as parcels of investable, material space that ‘largely represent histories and visions of the most privileged’ (Allen et al., 2019), place might be understood as consisting of ‘overlapping and competing place-frames... [so that] place-making does not require access to any resources to practice’ (Allen et al., 2019). In this way of thinking, Black place-making is *led by* Black spatial thought and action, rather than by a material capacity to possess territory, invest in it and keep others off it.

As Allen et al. point out, relational place-making is not unique to Black Geographies (see for example Pierce et al., 2011). In deploying it, Black Geographies is reaching out to tentatively re-evaluate and draw from the larger pool of geographical thought. Yet relational place-making is still about making space for Black place-making: rather than asserting a radical departure it accepts dominant spatialities and argues for an acceptance that multiple or palimpsestic

place-making can be layered on top of them. I wonder whether this additive relationality can really be a sufficiently radical answer for the voraciously exploitative and extractive processes that accompany racial capitalism: poverty, inequality, environmental racism (Agyeman, 2013; Pulido, 2016; Abdu et al., forthcoming). My point in this section has been that, potentially, Black Geographies works in the long term towards more radical theorisations of Black spatialities, coming less from existing geographical thought and more through observation and recuperation of Black spatial agency. Through the slow work of theorising from ethnographies of activist and grassroots spatial practice, and through the recognition of Black cultural practice as geographical, Black Geographies is building towards spatial theory that is centred on Black life and thought, even within continuing conditions of impossibility.

III The changing spatial logics of Black Geographies

This section considers that powerful spatial logics have shaped the beginning of Black Geographies, rooting it in the US. However, its future spatial logics are less predictable. According to its own decolonising logic, Black thought is always already decentring the US, both because its centring of Black lives and thought resonates with Black geographers who focus on other contexts, and because the ever-present differences within Blackness cut through and connect Black Geographies with a wide range of differently emplaced intersections and struggles.

Recent attempts to globalise Black Geographies so labelled open up some of these questions of changing spatial logics. Camilla Hawthorne (2019) notes rightly that Black Geographies is fed by a Black Radical Tradition that includes the Martinican writer Fanon as much as the Combahee River Collective. At the same time, she notes that other tributaries that flow into Black Geographies are from Black Caribbean theories and studies (James, 2001; Mintz, 1986; Glissant, 1997) and from what she calls 'Black/African diaspora studies' (Hawthorne, 2019: 5),

in which she includes Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. Notable to me, as someone with a heritage and interest in Caribbean Studies, is that Caribbean writers are prominent in all these different tributaries, and not just because Caribbean thinkers have a long tradition of being spatially mobile (James, 1998). Caribbean writers feed into Black Geographies through multiple spatial trajectories because Black thought is no respecter of borders and 'borderization' (Mbembe, 2021: 21). Despite racialised border security measures (Browne, 2015), Black thought moves with the Black person – including the dispossessed, the refugee, the migrant and the fugitive – and it will therefore very often overflow conventional geographical boundaries. Pinnock (forthcoming, n. p.) note their concept of Global Black Geographies is not seeking to exclude Black Geographies, but, by '[b]ypassing the North Atlantic' it does seek to 'take up its questioning elsewhere', interrogating the nation-state and other postcolonial spatial formations that might make Black spatial thought 'available for capture' (see also Uzor, 2018, on the concept of 'avoiding capture'). To think beyond the nation-state and other forms of geopolitical territoriality that come out of colonialism and anti-colonialism, is to seek and find Black Geographies wherever they might be, without geopolitical limits, navigating their own 'wayward' (Hartman, 2019) spatial logics. It is impossible at this point to say what such thoroughly decolonised logics might be, or even whether they are entirely possible within the current global capitalist system. Certainly, digital communication, including social media, will be important in future patterns of circulation of Black knowledge (Okoye, 2021b; Gayle, 2020), with routes that wander outside the formal academy and well beyond language (Joseph and Bell, 2020; Sobande, 2020; Télémaque, 2021; Uzor 2020).

Even while we wait for Black spatialities to be more fully revealed, an already emergent global field of Black Geographies (not always so named) recognises that, in the here and now, spaces and places – the European, African or Australian city, for example – are constituted with and through Blackness (Noxolo, 2016; Shaw, 2013; Simone, 2009). Conversely, Black Geographies begins to be marked by a recognition that Blackness is constituted in and by a

wide range of places and spaces (cf. Allen et al., 2019). The emplacedness of Blackness requires an attention to specificity. Where in the US intimate sites of Black existence like the stoop and the Black-owned business are key spatial sites and symbols of Black discourse and resistance (Brand, 2018), in the Caribbean, Canada and Australia studies of other intimate spaces – the *lakou*, the street corner, the mall, the café – reveal other political sites of surveillance and resistance through dance and playfulness (Sapp Moore, 2021; Lobo, 2016; Recollet, 2015; Stanley Niaah, 2010; see also Hirsch and Jones, 2021 on intimacy and joy). But emplacedness does not of course deny the transnational and geopolitical logics of white supremacy, in terms of the mobile and shared logics of colonialism (McKittrick, 2011) that intersect (Massey, 1995) each place. There is a need to be alive to both the specific and the shared spatialities of each of many Blacknesses, as well as each of many ‘racisms’ (Hall, 1992: 13).

To maintain this balance between the specific and the shared, Black Geographies will seek to avoid the iterative colonising logic of Geography’s history as a discipline in which explorers set out repeatedly from the colonial centre to map and fix identities (Noxolo, 2017). And yet, as Cusicanqui (2012) has warned in relation to decolonial theory, given the nature of publishing regimes and career structures it may well be only the most mobile versions of Black Geography that get taken up within the global neoliberal academy, those that can be packaged in the US or Europe and applied in a range of places, rather than those that are genuinely grounded in the diversity and specificity of Black experience. One example of the issues faced in the circulation of knowledge based on specific Black spatialities is the wide range of languages spoken in the African diaspora, not least the imposition and separate circulation of colonial languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese, English): in the colonial period and after it, language difference cuts distinct swathes of circulatory routes and boundaries across the globe. As Ngugi waThiong’o (1986) made clear many years ago, language is a key component of identity and therefore of place and space. Historically, for example, some hugely important Afro-Brazilian Lusophone voices in

Geography have had their range and influence seriously curtailed during their lifetimes, due to the dominance of Anglophone geographies and the unresponsiveness of translation agendas (Santos, 2021; Ferretti and Pedrosa, 2018; Nascimento, translation available in Smith et al., 2021). Nonetheless, digital affordances make new experiments in multi-lingual and multi-modal communication accessible to many more globally (see for example Global Black Geographers Collective, 2022): such innovations hold a promise of more transnationally dialogic futures.

Given the diversity and specificity of Blackness, the future of Black Geographies might be a splintered one, dividing into different locations, such as Black British Geographies (Noxolo, 2016), or, for that matter, into different specialisms within Geography, such as Black Urbanisms (Simone, 2009). An alternative is to make difference foundational to Black Geographies, thinking consistently across differences within Blackness, as they take place, within their own localities (Bledsoe and Wright, 2019a). Given its interdisciplinary routing in US-based Black Feminism (Crenshaw 2019), and despite its frequent misuse (Hopkins, 2019) where it becomes unmoored from the politics of race and gender, intersectionality is always already available as a means to think Black Geographies’ contention with difference. Always a fully contextualised ‘work-in-progress’ (Carbado et al., 2013: 304), intersectionality digs deep into the precise articulations among Blackness, class, gender, disability, sexuality (Eaves, 2017; Nayak, 2019; Rosenberg, 2021; White, 2020) and many other differences that inflect Blackness and (anti-)racism in highly contextualised ways. Moreover, the connections and disconnections between Black people and differently racialised/ethnicised groups – indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Irish, Jewish – are structured through highly distinct and localised historical narratives of conviviality, collectivity, contingent allyships and, sometimes, complicity (Chari, 2021; Ramírez, 2020; Shaw, 2013). They raise urgent issues around subject positions: who can speak for and about communities with such complex intersections? Each of these intersections (and many more) within and around Blackness must be carefully researched within, and from the precise enunciative positions within, its own distinctive emplacement.

Only with this careful attention to specificity can Black spatialities be approached through their own highly complex, im/possible spatial logics.

IV Conclusion: Im/possible conditions of Black geographical knowledge production

The conclusion of this short report is that the impacts of the im/possible logics and conditions of a post-colonial and historically anti-Black discipline are inescapable, making Black Geographies an im/possible endeavour. However, the decolonial and anti-racist critique that Black Geographies provides, in conjunction with the historical and contemporary affordances of globalised and mobile Black traditions of thought, both inside and outside the academy, might enable some even more radical departures in the future.

A thread running through this report has been the im/possible enunciative position of Black Geographies. I have conceded from the outset that Black geographers do not exclusively produce Black Geographies. However, despite our small number, the main implication of my argument here is that Black Geographies *should* overwhelmingly come from Black geographers. Why? As I have set out, the main critique that Black Geographies mounts is that geographical knowledge has historically been exclusionary of Black spatial thought and agency: in response, Black Geographies centres Black spatial thought and agency. Therefore, unless the discipline actually recruits and retains enough Black geographers to sustain a field named ‘Black Geographies’, the name itself will become a risible fig leaf for a determinedly white discipline that continues the colonial business as usual of both surveilling Black lives and erasing Black spatial agency. As Hawthorne and Heitz (2018: 150) have asserted very clearly: ‘The marginalisation of Black geographic scholarship within the discipline cannot be understood separately from the marginalization of Black scholars at all levels within geography’. We shall see whether Black Geographies can sustain itself within this im/possible tension.

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Notes

1. Black will be capitalised throughout, as a political identity. However, political terminology is a thoroughly unsettled and dynamic terrain. Therefore, wherever I am quoting from someone, I will keep their spelling, whether black or Black.
2. Black in Black Geographies is focused within the dark-skinned African diaspora. There are those who are beginning to question this, introducing more inclusive political notions of Blackness (e.g. Chari, 2021). However, given the recentring of whiteness and the huge ethnic differences, inequalities and forms of colourism that are often obscured by more generalist ‘non-white’ or ‘BAME’-type formations, this article maintains the specificity of Black as dark-skinned/African diaspora, with all due recognition of the many slippages and non-contiguity between the two.

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