Blackness everywhere

How the state maintains and manifests racialized power

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Introduction

Recent projections by global organizations (e.g. the United Nations and World Health Organization) suggest that by the year 2050 nearly 85% of the world’s population will live in an urban or near-urban area. The U.S. Census indicates that upwards of 85% of Black Americans live in urban or near-urban areas, suggesting that the urban Black experience is ripe for examining and forecasting this global broader trend towards urbanization. Across a range of disciplines that consider the social and political realities of predominantly Black communities, there has been some debate as to the larger causes with specific focus on the role of socio-economic factors and state-authorized patterns of racial segregation.

Arguing that structural economic changes, in particular the shift away from a goods-producing to a service-producing economy, have led to increased concentrations of poverty especially in Black enclaves, some scholars have pointed to socio-economic forces as primary causes for the current and persistent disparities within and across Black enclaves. Positing a larger theory of social isolation, Wilson (1996) for example, offered the classic argument that dramatic socio-economic shifts and the out-migration of Whites from urban areas leave behind an urban Black population with limited educational levels, job skills, and social networks. To be sure, Wilson’s claims have not gone unchallenged. In effect, these challenges have pointed to domestic and global patterns of racial residential segregation as emblematic of causes unaddressed by Wilson.

Additionally, explicit and implicit focus on issues of residential segregation has encompassed much of the continued attention to the social and political realities and histories of Black life. Continued debates about the causes and continuance of urban Black neighborhoods, and the changes thereof, have been situated along two complementary perspectives: (1) spatial assimilation and (2) place stratification (Charles, 2003). Focusing more directly on the link between socio-economic opportunity and status and cross-racial difference in wealth accumulation and returns to education, the spatial assimilation perspective privileges understandings of mobility.
Within this perspective scholars have argued that the continued social isolation of Black urban dwellers is the result of constrained socio-economic opportunities, dwindling job prospects, and low educational levels. Here, then the persistence of poverty in urban Black neighborhoods is directly linked to economic opportunities and larger trends of urban disinvestment. Black neighborhoods continue to decline because opportunities for low-skilled work in particular, and economic and educational opportunities in cities more broadly, continue to decline. In essence, works within this perspective have argued that patterns of residential segregation generally, and the socio-political realities of urban Black enclaves “is simply the logical outcome of these differences in status and the associated differences in lifestyle” (Oliver and Shapiro, 1995; Clark, 1989; Charles, 2003:176).

Challenging the focus on socio-economic status and opportunities (or the lack thereof) as primary, research within the place stratification perspective has focused sharply on issues of residential segregation, racial attitudes, and discriminatory practices as fundamentally linked to the rise and fall of urban Black neighborhoods. Key to this perspective is the focus and serious attention to institutional and individual-level actions as fundamentally connected to the isolation of and persistence of poverty in urban Black neighborhoods in particular, and global racial residential segregation.

Spurred on by the analysis of racial residential segregation patterns across cities as presented in Massey and Denton’s American Apartheid (1993), scholars in this perspective point to the attitudes of whites, restrictive covenants, and persistent racism as key. For instance, Alba and Logan argue that a racial “group’s relative standing in society” is key to the opportunities for spatial mobility and key to understanding the racial residential segregation patterns across cities (Alba and Logan, 1993: 1391). Others demonstrating the direct effects of individual-level actions have highlighted the implications of White attitudes and sheer reluctance about interracial neighborhoods and having racial minorities as neighbors (see e.g. Gans, 1982; Rieder, 1985). In addition, scholars highlighting practices such as restrictive covenants, redlining and discriminatory mortgage procedures of real estate agencies and the Federal Housing Administration have further pointed to the connection between the rise, and persistent decline of and in urban neighborhoods and institutional-level actions and behaviors (Massey and Denton, 1993; Sharkey, 2013). Ultimately, the place stratification perspective takes more seriously the role of racial prejudice in determining the spatial mobility of Blacks and the economic viability and stability of urban Black enclaves and the residents therein.

Taken together, all of these perspectives highlight the socio-political and economic climate in which Blackness, urbanity, the state, and place are intertwined and mutually constitutive. Centering the subjectivity of Black residents and the internal divisions within the larger Black population has helped elucidate the role of individual-level actions and state racial logics about place and policy (Pattillo, 1999, 2010; Hunter, 2013, 2017, 2018; Rothstein, 2017; Hunter and Robinson, 2018). While some researchers have highlighted the role of internal divisions within the larger Black population, this work has focused on national origin as the key internal division, evidenced in the analysis of the emergent distinction between African Americans, Africans and Afro-Caribbeans. This chapter instead will amplify other divisions, particularly those around global Blackness and region, which will in turn add to the larger discussion and theorization of the role of individual-level actions in the creation, maintenance, and collapse of Blackness in and through state action.

Race has been an effective tool with which the state has determined where to show its best and worst manifestations. It is through racism that the state can simultaneously deny and weaponize its mirroring systems of justice/injustice and inequality/equality. As a range of
scholars have demonstrated, the reach of the global effects of race and racism extends beyond the confines of the Western Hemisphere. Colonization has had a nearly totalizing effect on the globe, carrying with it a range of racial logics to effectively disaggregate “us” from “them”—be they indigenous (to Australia, Africa, the Caribbean, North or South America, and all the places in between) and/or of color (non-White, Black, Arab, Latinx, Chicana) (see e.g. Said, 1979; Appiah, 1991; Alexander, 1996; Pierre, 2012; Ahmed, 2013; Smith, 2013; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 2015; Hudson, 2017). As critical geographers (Wynter, 2003; McKittrick, 2006; McKittrick and Woods, 2007; Hunter and Robinson, 2018) demonstrate, our current maps are the products of the purposeful manifest destiny and capitalist conquests of European nations.

As a result, Blackness has traveled. Blackness arrived unanticipated in some places, nestled alongside and surrounding White supremacy in other places, and even in other places still Blackness burst into a pigmentocracy (Telles, 2014)—a spectrum of browns, blacks, oranges, neutrals and reds (see e.g. Telles and Ortiz, 2008; Omi and Winant, 2014; Beaman, 2017; Hunter, 2017). Blackness has stayed, even as many would proclaim its death and flight from the geographies and places it helped sustain and produce purposefully, inadvertently, and proactively. Indeed, nation states dispensing with anti-Blackness has solidified and rendered visible other sustaining locations of disempowerment amidst supposed states of freedom.

This chapter explores and demonstrates these aforementioned features of Blackness and its relationship to the state. In each of the subsequent three sections, the chapter draws on the experience and insights we can gain from attending to Blackness as a global social fact and epiphenomenon. That Blackness has traveled, arrived, and stayed is at the heart of the discussion. So, too, are the racial logics of the state whereby racism becomes obdurate and indispensable.

Exploring the consequences of the social fact of Blackness, this chapter draws on key insights from a range of disciplines, implicitly highlighting its transdisciplinary and global nature. Centering and building out from critical insights of Steve Biko, Derrick Bell and Audre Lorde, this chapter looks across many socio-political landscapes and intersections to underscore the obdurate contours of race and racism. The chapter concludes by suggestion that future scholarship, research and understandings of race and racism benefit from a continued expansion of notions and practices of Blackness.

What if Steve Biko and Derrick Bell were right?

Blackness is everywhere as a consequence of White supremacy, quests for manifest destiny, colonization, European and Arab slave trades, and racial capitalism (see e.g. Feagin, 1991; Gilroy, 1993; Rodney, 1972; Robinson, 2000; Hall, 2006; Pierre, 2012; Hudson and McKittrick, 2014; Hudson, 2017). With each addition to the empire, a new place and group had to be folded in so as to count in favor for but never against the status quo. There is no place in the world perhaps more primed to demonstrate the importance and consequences of this insight than South Africa.

Where America’s brand of racism and race may be a source of overgeneralization, the Black South African experience provides a generative way to look at race and racism through the continued entanglements of the colonization of Africa, African independence movements, Pan-Africanism and state sanctioned racialized violence via the Apartheid regime (Marx, 1998; Veracini, 2010). Where Jim Crow would seem effective yet limited and finite, Apartheid made racialized logics laws, manifesting them in passbooks, racially disparate health and wealth outcomes, and a national practice (Brubaker, 2004; Marx, 1998).
Blackness in this context is perhaps even more visible, with national mandates enforced at all levels to limit the lives and outcomes of Black and Coloured South Africans.

Coming of age amidst this context, freedom fighter and scholar Steve Biko’s work is especially generative here. Bantu-educated and a Black South African of Xhosa origin, Biko was a product of South Africa’s educational racial segregation practice and policy. 1971 had been a difficult year in the anti-Apartheid struggle. Passbooks were the necessary accessories to the survival of Black South Africans (see e.g. Wolpe, 1972; Lipton, 1986). While an average White South African might find their lives deeply insulated from the daily horrors of the Apartheid system, those deemed Black, Coloured or even adjacent to Blackness went without the courtesy of ignorance of Apartheid.

During that same year, Biko was key in the founding of the Black People’s Conference, which set to work to draw together the range of anti-Apartheid activists with an emphasis on raising Black consciousness. Over that year, Biko had delivered and written critical and racially radical remarks that aimed to demonstrate that those not a part of the dominant power elite comprised a larger and potentially more politically powerful constituency of underdeveloped allies and comrades. “Black people—real black people”—a direct and impassioned Biko professed, “are those who can manage to hold their heads high in defiance rather than willingly surrender their souls to the white man” (Biko, 2017: 52).

Blackness is everywhere as a consequence of anti-Blackness—the product of a steady diet of messages of racial stereotypes, danger, and violence (see e.g. Feagin, 1991; Pierre, 2012; Hudson and McKittrick, 2014). Though, as scholars have demonstrated, this proposition applies globally, it is in the United States that we find a generative and perhaps most evident in America’s hypermedia culture. Despite the promises of Civil Rights legislation (e.g. the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Fair Housing Act of 1968), by the late 1980s it had become clear that Reaganomics was not trickling down but up. Key in this debate, at the time and for some time thereafter, was whether the local, state and federal policies better known collectively as Affirmative Action were of use, working and constitutional (see e.g. Forman, 2017; Rothstein, 2017).

While many fought such policies of the unfounded arguments of embedded racial favoritism, Critical Race scholars have shown that not only does Whiteness operate legally as property but also that Affirmative Action was an always already handicapped policy. While it may help to bring historically underrepresented populations into previously racially segregated professional and education spaces, it had become clear by the early 1990s that these policies were limited in their impact, favoring White women, leaving many with a certain racial reality where racism was obdurate, ever more buoyant despite state interventions. Aware and insightful on this point, pioneering scholar Derrick Bell did not mince words. “Black people will never gain full equality in this country,” Bell powerfully observes, “Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary ‘peaks of progress,’ short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance” (Bell, 1992:12, emphasis in the original). Bell’s provocation would prove prescient then and now. Just a few years later, state sanctioned practices of racism and Blackness, like South Africa, in Los Angeles were on the global stage.

A man is dragged from his seat. A group of police officers congregate around him as the recording continues. By the end of the ordeal the man, hospitalized and humiliated, becomes a siren song for resistance and uprising. A half-hearted apology is issued by those responsible. Sounds familiar? You may be thinking of the 2017 United Airlines ordeal. Yet twenty-five years earlier, the scene was a traffic stop in Los Angeles. The man was not a doctor and not of Asian descent, but instead a Black resident of Los Angeles named Rodney King.
The verdict “not guilty,” rang out across the Los Angeles’s Black belt like acid on old wounds. By 1992, Black migration from the American South had over the twentieth century manifested as an entire Black region, South-Central Los Angeles. Neighborhoods like Leimert Park and Baldwin Hills were built on a history of black artists and entertainers great enough to make millions but too Black for Beverly Hills and Bel-Air. Separate water fountains and bathrooms had been replaced with separate communities and regions of the city. So when the brutal beating of Rodney King hit the television and airwaves, the graphic images and tale were an all too familiar reminder that Black migrants had not escaped the chokehold of the Jim Crow South. The South had followed them to California, refracted back in a video of a Black man being savagely beaten by police officers. Never before had a recording so captured the experience. Never before had there been such clear indisputable evidence of the tendency for police officers to be forgetful of the humanity of Black citizens. Even still, hearts would be crushed, tears shed and storefronts damaged after word of the “not guilty” verdict spread through South-Central.

From late April until early May, the Rodney King verdict reverberated across the city and nation in waves of protests, unrest and heavy police presence. Stores and buildings burned with the fury of a population that had escaped the South only physically. The commonly unheard voices of the city’s Black and Latino residents roared just beyond the gates and palm tree-lined campus of the University of Southern California (see e.g. Hunt, 1997; Hunt and Ramón, 2010).

Twenty-five years later many things have changed. On the site of the 1992 rebellions, now sits a construction site accompanied by the noise and scaffolding of new light rail construction. Built on the future of Los Angeles, the site—packed with steel and concrete—will create a vast transportation intersection between South-Central and the rest of the city by 2020. As predominantly white runners’ clubs jog along the blocks that burned after the verdict, the spectacle of twenty-five years ago is merely a distant memory (Hunter and Robinson, 2018).

The name of the region of the city has changed too. No longer “South-Central”, the area is called South LA and Mid-City now. Newly built light rail traverses back and forth between downtown and the Santa Monica promenade, as young White families and residents have discovered how convenient the area is. Where there was once an isolated set of Black neighborhoods, there are gentrifying blocks. Many displaced Black residents have gone back to the South to states like Texas and Louisiana and cities like Atlanta and Houston. Those who are poor, homeless and unemployed move about the city’s shrinking residential choices, as the cost of living continues to price them out.

Twenty-five years later many things remain deeply consistent too. Tinseltown continues to draw Black people West in search of fame, fortune and freedom. Los Angeles still reflects the unrealized aspirations of the some of the oldest Americans, Black people. Indeed, UCLA’s recent reports confirm that diversity in Hollywood remains relatively non-existent. Hollywood, like the famous sign affixed to Laurel Canyon, is still White. Black actresses, like almost all of the Black LA workforce, are forced to live out their dreams in a highly segmented and segregated labor industry. Although the median household income of Black households in Los Angeles has historically outpaced the national average, Black homeowner- ship and Black employment levels remain low and are declining.

Historically, Black communities and the various neighborhoods to which they belong are contracting. Across the world there has been a relative decline in the urban Black population—from Los Angeles’s South-Central, New York City’s Harlem, to Manchester’s Moss Side, to London’s Brixton, to Guangzhou, China (just to name a few). Los Angeles’s Black Belt,
for example, bears this fact out especially well. South Los Angeles comprises seven neighborhoods along the forthcoming Crenshaw/LAX light rail transit line: (1) West Adams, (2) Jefferson Park, (3) Baldwin Hills/Crenshaw, (4) Leimert Park, (5) View Park-Windsor Hills, (6) Hyde Park, and (7) Inglewood. Based upon decennial census records, the aggregate population in these neighborhoods grew from 280,488 to 321,734 between 1970 and 2010. Despite the growth in the area’s overall population, the Black population in particular has seen an extended decline, falling from 180,960 in 1980 to just 151,476 in 2010. This equates to a drop in the Black share of the population from 63.8% to 48.2%. Over the same period of time, the white non-Hispanic population has also declined from 16.3% to 4.2%, and the Asian-Pacific Islander population also declined from 3.8% to 3%. However, the Hispanic population has increased from 14.7% to 43.9%, an increase of 100,230 residents. Finally, by immigration status, the fraction of individuals who were foreign-born grew from 8.6% to 27.5%.

As a result, new all-White residential zones are forming. Police helicopters fly above, while their patrols increase in their surveillance strategies of poor and working class, ethnic and racial communities. And shiny new trains traverse old racial boundaries. The city emerges from the ashes of the uprising, while long-standing Black residents fend for themselves. The makings of a classic movie about the South or country western, this, however is just a slice of Black life in LaLa Land twenty-five years after the verdict.

**What if Audre Lorde was right?**

Blackness is everywhere as a consequence of categories and the relations thereof to power. Focused in particular on the Global South in her perspective, scholar and Black feminist Audre Lorde’s insights allow us to see how the entanglements of race and sexuality inform a particular kind of Blackness, one that is circumscribed by state policies that often target LGBTQ people and Black women in particular in the U.S. and abroad. “For the master’s tool will never dismantle the master’s house,” Lorde notably reminds us, “They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game but they will never enable us to bring about real change … Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time” (Lorde, 1984: 112–114). Here the site and practice of state policies via incarceration and criminal justice are especially generative to extend out from Lorde’s provocation.

Lorde’s prescience highlights the limits of models and theories that rely only on master narratives about marginalized and oppressed peoples. The tools of state repression, such as anti-Blackness, even if reframed, will not secure the end of racism or homophobia. For example, when Black transgender people are incarcerated, many are forced to serve their time based upon a gender designation not of their choosing (Richie, 2012). Of course, this makes for additional stressors and may likely increase the importance of familial support. Where cisgender Americans may have this support from their biological families, oftentimes the opposite is true for those who are transgender; thus making fictive family members as important, if not more important, in overall successful reintegration of formerly incarcerated transgender Americans.

Research has illustrated that there is a vibrant global Black LGBT population living under equally, if not more, dire constraints relative to their heterosexual counterparts (Richie, 2012). Black LGBT individuals convicted of crimes are incarcerated alongside their heterosexual counterparts, often without proper adjustments to account for the needs of black transgender inmates (Richie, 2012). It is often the case that the gender indicated on birth certificates dictates where the inmate is assigned, leaving many black transgender prisoners
misplaced and vulnerable to the gender practices and constraints of the facilities in which they serve their time.

Furthermore, Lorde’s provocation illustrates that systemic shifts require intersectional methodological frameworks. That is, the impact of race, class, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status shapes the experience and outcomes of individuals and is also critically reflected in the composition of familial networks. Black LGBT Americans’ familial networks often predominantly comprise other members of the Black LGBT community. Intersectional analyses anticipate this reality and as a result, must be sensitive to the experiences of those impacted by both racism and homophobia. Oppression and prejudice are reinforced by state sanctions structures and institutions like prisons, rendering the Black LGBT experience especially potent for helping to identify and eliminate the mechanisms of inequality deeply embedded in systems of justice and incarceration. Despite the overlapping oppressions of racism and homophobia, in our research and models we often miss the key experiences of transmen and transwomen (of all backgrounds) because our working conceptions of incarceration and punishment are heteronormative and gendered.

While we know that LGBT men and women are not immune from mass incarceration, emphasis on their treatment, support, and reentry would help better identify latent and explicit mechanisms of oppression and inequality impacting the world’s prison population. For example, incarcerated transwomen and transmen are most likely to be assigned based upon normative gender assumptions and assignments per their birth certificate. Added to this is the role of sexual orientation and its impact on the experience and imprisonment of sexual minorities. As scholars have demonstrated, alongside racial logics the prison industrial complex, in architecture and practice, is built upon regressive, suppressive, and normative assumptions about gender and sexuality (Davis, 2011; Haley, 2016; Richie, 2012). Questions examining the experiences of Black LGBT inmates and former felons would provide a powerful intersectional lens that would identify critical gaps in the reentry and probation programs that contribute to high rates of recidivism and programmatic failures. Black feminism and Black LGBT scholarship remind us that some of the best and most profound strategies to correct systems and patterns of inequality and oppression are within the voices and experiences of minorities (see Davis, 1981; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982; Combahee River Collective, 1983; Moraga, 1983; Smith, 1983; Hooks, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Glenn, 1985; Anzaldúa, 1990; Mohanty, 1988; Spelman, 1988; Collins, 1989, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Sandoval, 1991; King, 1988; Carbado, 1999; Cohen, 1999, 2005; Wallcott, 2003; Battle & Bennett, 2005; Johnson & Henderson, 2005).

Conclusion

While the global Great Recession (2008–2010) has yielded fruitful debates and research regarding the reach of Blackness, racism, and inequality such as banking crises and their impact, sub-prime mortgage lending, unemployment, and health care, retirement has received less attention, particularly among sociologists. In much of the existing research on labor, wealth, and the world of work, the focus most often has been exclusively upon pre-retirement workers, glass ceilings along lines of race and gender, and general racially disparate outcomes in labor force (see e.g. Halle, 1984; Kanter, 1977; Oliver and Shapiro, 1997; Conley, 1999).

A report from the U.S. Census Bureau (2005: 641), for example, reported: “In 1999, 8.2%, 12.3%, 19.6% and 23.5% of White, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino and Black persons age 65 and above, respectively, lived below the poverty level.” According to
Rockeymoore and Maitin–Shepard (2010: 1), “African Americans (95%) and Hispanics (85%) … are more likely than whites (80%) to assert that Social Security is or will be an important part of their retirement income.” Such reports indicate racial differences in retirement practices, poverty rates for senior citizens, and reliance upon federal welfare entitlement programs.

Racial differences in life expectancy and mortality rates further amplify the implicit and explicit effects of state sanctioned practices of race and racism. That is, although Black workers contribute to long-term retirement benefit systems, globally Black workers do not live as long as their White counterparts due to health disparities and violence; thus Black workers, globally, are structurally situated to benefit less than their White counterparts from the welfare policies such as retirement and other entitlement systems, such as state-based healthcare.

As a recent report from the Urban Institute (2011: 5) indicates, there are also important racial disparities in income distribution among U.S. workers:

Among men age 50 to 61 employed full time, 2009 median annual earnings totaled $56,100 for non-Hispanic Whites, compared with $40,800 for African Americans, $35,700 for Hispanics, and $50,000 for Asians … The earnings gap between men of color and non-Hispanic Whites did not change much after 62.

It follows, then, that if non-Whites generally and Black people more specifically, have worse health outcomes and lower incomes over the life course than most other demographic groups, then it is likely that the limited outcomes and access to employment, full citizenship and welfare programs are a reflection of how race and racism, vis-a-vis Blackness in particular, travel, stay and are deployed to delimit the fates of some and amplify the wealth and outcomes of the dominant power majority.

References


