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White Space(s) and the Reproduction of White Supremacy

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Abstract

In the past two decades, social scientists have begun to explicitly interrogate the racialized economic, political, cultural, and ideological mechanisms of social space. This work interrogates the overt and covert racial organization of social spaces and the ways in which systemic White supremacy is facilitated by racialized space. Drawing on and synthesizing that work we explicate a critical theory of *White space*, explicating how geographical, physical, cultural, and ideological social spaces reproduce a racialized social structure organized by White supremacy. We argue that White spaces are integral to racialized social systems and global anti-Black racism in ways that not only normalize the existing racial and social order but ensures Whites' fantasy(ies) of complete dominion over place and space, as well as control over brown and Black bodies.

Keywords

White space, White supremacy, racism, White imaginary, police brutality

Introduction

On March 25, 2020, Christian Cooper, a middle-aged African American man, was bird watching in Central Park in New York City when he ran into a White woman who was allowing her dog to play off-leash in the Ramble, a semiwild section of the park. Mr.

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Cooper told the White woman that dogs were required to be on a leash in the Ramble, a city regulation, and asked that she leash her dog. When the woman refused to put her dog on a leash, Mr. Cooper pulled out some dog treats to entice the dog out of the Ramble—he also began recording the interaction. The video of this interaction shows the White woman, Amy Cooper (no relation to Mr. Cooper) becoming irate, and screaming at Mr. Cooper to get away from her, although she was the one advancing on him. She then told Mr. Cooper that she was going to call the police and she yelled, "I'm going to tell them there's an African American man threatening my life." Mr. Cooper responded, "please do call the police" and "please tell them whatever you like." In the video, we next witness Ms. Cooper calling the police and dishonestly informing them that she and her dog were being threatened by an African American man and to please hurry to the location.[1]

On the same spring day, half way across the country, in Minneapolis, Minnesota an employee at Cup Foods, a convenience store in South Minneapolis, called the police on George Floyd, also an African American man, alleging that he has used a counterfeit $20 bill to make a purchase in the store. Video footage of this event shows police arriving, pulling George Floyd from his car, hand cuffing him, and attempting to force him into the back of the police car. Mr. Floyd resisted the officers' attempts to force him in the back of the car and pleaded with the police not to hurt him. Unable to get him into the police car, the officers push him to the ground, and Minneapolis police officer Derrick Chauvin placed his knee on the back of Mr. Floyd's neck while two other officers knelt on his back and legs. Bystander recordings show Mr. Floyd begging for help, pleading that he could not breathe and that he was dying. Despite Mr. Floyd's pleas for help, Officer Chauvin remained on George Floyd's neck, with two other officers on his back, and one more watching the scene for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. By the time an ambulance arrived Mr. Floyd was dead.[2]

Within 24 hours of the killing of George Floyd, protestors filled the streets of Minneapolis and Saint Paul, and soon the protests against racist police brutality moved to cities across the nation and around the world. The brutal image of George Floyd being suffocated to death while he begged for breath and called for his mother led to what has been described as one of the largest civil rights protests in history. For scholars of race and racism, it was particularly striking that this grotesque display of police brutality against a Black man occurred on the same day that another Black man had been threatened by a White woman who wanted to deploy a racialized (and gendered) trope of victimization and threat to engage police to take action against a Black man. Amy Cooper recognized that her dog whistle claim, the false allegation that she, a White woman, was being threatened by an African American man, would be both believed and could result in state action, carried out by police, on her behalf and against Mr. Cooper. As sociologists of race and racism in the United States, we understand that Amy Cooper's threat to call the police on this Black man was more than a mere invocation of stereotypes; in a society organized by the logics of White supremacy (see Smith, 2012), her actions were a tacit death threat—a social fact borne out by the police killing of George Floyd on the same day.

In the forefront of these juxtaposed incidents in May of 2020 is the fact that the United States remains organized by systemic White supremacy. What we want to call attention to in this article and in this double special issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist*, is the institutional operation of one of the pillars of structural White supremacy: *White space*. The incident in Central Park, for example, exemplified not only the routine operation of the racist state apparatus (made more cogent by the police killing of George Floyd) but also of the power of individual citizens to police White space—both literally and figuratively. Amy Cooper asserted a claim to dominion over the Ramble in Central Park that included complete confidence in her entitlement to use and enjoy a public city space without being subject to the regulations of that space. Her assurance in that dominion was so absolute that when she was asked by a Black man, also in that public city space, to follow those regulations, she understood implicitly that she could call the police to her aid. She believed without question that if she told the police a Black man was threatening her, they were likely to respond to protect *her* entitlement to that space unbothered by Mr. Cooper, as opposed to enforcing the prescribed regulations against her.

The concept of White space captures the normative operation of race and racism in geographical, physical, ideological, and cultural space. Social science studies on racial residential segregation have long demonstrated how resources get organized around race and geography in ways that facilitate disproportionate access to economic, social, and political resources for White people in the United States. Recently, scholars have also turned attention to the ways in which White privilege and domination become embedded in other social spaces such as public social spaces (Anderson, 2011), educational institutions (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick 2006; Feagin et al., 1996; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Moore, 2008; Moore & Bell, 2017), places of employment (Evans & Moore, 2016; Harvey Wingfield, 2010, 2013), places of worship (Bracey & Moore, 2017), and other racialized organizations and institutions (see Ray, 2019). Moreover, scholars have begun to interrogate not only the racial demography of physical social spaces but also the cultural and ideological mechanisms that entrench White norms, beliefs, values, and logics that racially organize these spaces. White space works to facilitate patterned behaviors that normalize White resource hoarding, racially oppressive hierarchies, and the routine subjugation of people of color (Embrick et al., 2019; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Moore, 2008; see also Embrick, 2011). These special issues pull together the cutting-edge scholarship in the social sciences examining the connection between White space and White supremacy. In this article, we synthesize the intellectual threads that connect these areas of scholarship.

White Space(s) and Place(s)

We contend that White spaces are integral to racialized social systems (see Bonilla-Silva, 1997) and global anti-Black racism (Du Bois 1920) in ways that not only normalize the existing racial and social order but ensures Whites' fantasy(ies) of complete dominion over place and space, as well as control over Brown and Black bodies. Space, along with place, according to geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977), is about personal

security and freedom. In racialized social systems, both space and place are racialized such that the security and freedom emanating from social space and place flow disproportionately to Whites. As a result, the entitlement to enjoy and benefit from social spaces is organized and guarded by Whites and disproportionately benefits Whites so that these spaces become "geographies of privilege" (Twine & Gardener, 2013). Du Bois (1920) famously refers to these privileges of whiteness in his essay, "The Souls of White Folk," where he contends that whiteness and White identity is intricately linked to the extraordinary belief in Whites total domination over the Earth and all who live on it. Indeed, according to Du Bois, this belief in superiority becomes a psychological wage of whiteness. Most astutely, though often forgotten, is that Du Bois also noted that part of whiteness included the social conditioning of Whites to take pleasure in the suffering of Black and Brown people, suffering in all forms but particularly that expressed in sheer and egregious violence against Black people. Much like during Jim Crow Apartheid, Black and Brown people entering White space(s) comes with unspoken rules that any disruption of White entitlement to the free and full enjoyment of that space and its resources can lead Whites to lay formal claim to that space (see Bracey & Moore, 2017). This invocation of formal claim to White space can include violence, effectuated through their own actions or via the actions of other (e.g., law enforcement, vigilante groups). The schaudenfreude felt by Whites as a result of violence toward Black and Brown folk has a long history in the United States that not only reifies Whites' economic and political standing in society but also their sense of superiority. Thus, White space is much more than just a fight for scarce resources, it is an important part of global White supremacy and anti-Black racism.

Geographies of White Privilege: White Space(s), and Place(s)

Within 24 hours after the video of the police killing of George Floyd surfaced, the streets of South Minneapolis began to fill with protestors in response to this and other incidents of police brutality by the Minneapolis police. Soon the protests would resonate across the country, and within a week there were protests in support of Black Lives Matter and against racist police brutality around the world. The magnitude of these protests in response to the horrific killing of George Floyd by police was also linked to what New York Governor Andrew Cuomo suggested was a converging of structural forces resulting from a brutal police killing occurring in the middle of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic. Governor Cuomo noted that the very underresourced communities that are most susceptible to incidents of police brutality and violence were the same communities hit hardest by the pandemic.[3] In fact, COVID-19, which by the end of May had killed over 100,000 Americans, disproportionately affected communities of color.[4] The incidence of COVID-19 were highest in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color) communities, and People of Color remain at greater risk of getting very sick and dying from COVID-19 (Saenz, 2020; see also Bonila-Silva, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) noted that this is in part related to relationships between health care infrastructure and

people living in underresourced communities of color; the fact that people of color are disproportionately represented in jobs that are considered "essential" so were forced to continue working during shut-downs; as well as racial hierarchies in income and wealth.[5] As sociologists have noted, these converging forces of racist oppression are fundamentally tied to and reinforced by race and space—particularly with regard to geographical racial residential segregation.

Sociological research on residential segregation has long considered the connection between racially segregated neighborhoods and unequal distribution of resources along racial lines (Massey & Denton, 1993; Shapiro, 2017; see also Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2007). This research has been explicitly connected to the reproduction of inequities in wealth—primarily through access to the resource of home ownership as a means of wealth acquisition (Katznelson, 2005; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). In addition, research on residential segregation has illuminated connections between racially exclusive neighborhoods and inequitable access to workplaces and transportation to centers of employment (Wilson, 2007), inequitable food and nutrition resources (Zenk et al., 2005) and racist policing and surveillance (Embrick, 2015; Tonry, 2011). This research exposes the ways in which residential segregation functions as a mechanism of structural White supremacy, yet geographies of White privilege expand beyond geographical residential segregation.

The Political Production of Racialized Space

In 1970, speaking at a conference at the Institut d'Urbanisme in Paris, French sociologist Henri Lefebvre delivered a talk centered on the politics of space, most notably on the various aspects of spatiality and its role as ideology, political struggle, and a historical product. It is here that he is famously quoted for saying, "there is a politics of space because space is political" (Lefebvre, 1970/2009, p. 168). Space is ideological and political because, as Lefebvre noted, it is both social product and social resource. In a racialized social system steeped in White supremacy, space becomes contested ground for who belongs and who does not, who has access to the resources of the space and who does not. Space, as it is understood in the current racial and social order, is legitimized and protected by the state. And any attempts to disrupt the racial status quo in social spaces is met with hostility by Whites as well as representatives of the state itself, or what some scholars have labeled "Whitelash" (Embrick et al., 2020).

In 1976, Lefebvre further developed and solidified his sociological theory of space, which recognized the interconstitutive mechanics of physical, social, and mental space. More specifically, Lefebvre reaffirmed his contention that social spaces (broadly defined) are created and organized via sociopolitical processes and are shaped by politics and ideology. It is only in the past two decades, however, that sociologists have really begun to explicitly interrogate the racialized economic, political, and ideological mechanisms of social space; examining the overt and covert racial organization of social spaces and the ways in which systemic White supremacy is facilitated by racialized space. The result of this work has been the development of theoretical explications of the interconnected geographic, demographic, cultural, and ideological manifestations of White space and its role in reproducing White supremacy.

White Space and Social Institutions

In the post–Civil Rights era, Ture and Hamilton (1992) coined the term "institutional racism"—or "the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices" (p. 5) that are embedded within social institutions. The concept of institutional racism in the United States implies the existence of White space—with mechanisms of White control of access to that institutional space, White regulation of social values and interactions within those institutions, and White logics that organize the routine operation of those institutions.

The development of the concept of institutional racism coincided with increased access to major social institutions like education and employment after the legal changes resulting from the Civil Rights Movement. As spaces that had been exclusively White, experienced demographic changes once people of color were legally guaranteed some measure of access. Social scientists like Ture and Hamilton (1992) observed that these demographic changes did not result in racially equitable social institutions, or in meaningful material changes to distribution of institutional resources. While the scholarship on residential segregation has largely focused on demographic isolation, the work examining the characteristics of racialized organizations and institutions has attempted to delve deeper into structural arrangements within social, organizational, and institutional spaces.

A critical theory of White space imports the central tenets of the theory of institutional racism, recognizing the importance of the racial demography of social spaces but going beyond mere demography to examine hierarchies of power, racialized social values and practices, and embedded White logics. In 1990, Joan Acker developed a theory of gendered organizations. In explicating the process by which organizations become gendered, Acker (1990) emphasized the necessity of looking beyond demographics to examine how "advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine." (p. 146). In 2008, Wendy Leo Moore extended Acker's theory to the context of race to create a theory of "white institutional space"; a theoretical explication of organizations and institutions focusing on how advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, and meaning and identity get patterned in terms of a distinction between Whiteness and non-Whiteness. Moore (2008) noted that the juxtaposition between Whiteness and non-Whiteness is an imperfect parallel to masculine and feminine because it fails to capture the very different and nondichotomous histories and experiences of non-White racial groups; for example, the racialized history and experience of African Americans is quite different from that of Indigenous Americans. However, while the experience of race and racism of different groups in the United States has been distinct, because the United States has historically been and remains racially structured as a White supremacist state, non-White people have all (though via differing mechanisms and with differing consequences) been systematically denied access to the power and privileges that accrue to Whites. Thus, a theory of White institutional space begins by turning the gaze upon Whiteness (which contains an implicit concept of non-Whiteness), as the source of oppressive racist control (Mutua, 1999).[6]

Through this theoretical lens, Moore (2008) explicated how routine and systematic mechanisms, including racist historical exclusions, contemporary institutionalized hierarchies of power, institutionalized White racist logics, normalized racist ideologies and discourse, and everyday racialized practices function synergistically to channel the resources of U.S. organizations and institutions disproportionately to Whites. The mechanisms of White institutional space are so deeply constitutive of the infrastructure of U.S. organizations and institutions that they become tacit, implicitly understood without conscious thought, normalizing White superiority and successful attainment of institutional resources and characterizing non-White inferiority as normal in these social spaces.

The White Spatial Imaginary, White Ideology and Culture

In *How Racism Takes Place*, George Lipsitz (2011) discusses how seemingly race-neutral social spaces are constituted and reconstituted via White power and privilege. The reproduction of racialized power dynamics takes place spatially, according to Lipsitz (2011) through the "white spatial imaginary." Lipsitz suggests,

> The white spatial imaginary idealizes "pure" and homogenous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior. It seeks to hide social problems rather than solve them. . . This imaginary does not emerge simply or directly from the embodied identities of people who are white. It is inscribed in the physical contours or the places where we live, work and play and it is bolstered by financial rewards for whiteness (2011, p. 209).

The White spatial imaginary functions implicitly to normalize the organization of social spaces around White values and beliefs, White logics and ideologies, and White activities and practices while at the same time asserting, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, that these spaces are nonracialized.

Kimberle Crenshaw (1988) notes that the racial ideology of the United States, organized around principles of White supremacy, is a pillar of this country's social structure. She notes that, "Black people do not create their oppressive worlds moment to moment but rather are coerced into living in worlds created and maintained by others" (Crenshaw, 1988, p. 1357). Thus, it is not merely that the White spatial imaginary inculcates social spaces with White norms but that the norms of White racial ideology are imbued with an implicit anti-blackness. The inherent contradiction between assertions of nonracial space and the reality of White space make social spaces political sites of contestation just as Lefebvre (1991) suggested. As such, as African Americans and other people of color navigate White space, the White spatial imaginary operates as a cultural and ideological mechanism of White supremacy to denigrate and subjugate people of color in these spaces.

In materially important social organizations and institutions, such as educational institutions or workplaces, the White spatial imaginary functions to problematize the

very presence of Black people and other people of color within those spaces. Often that takes place through discursive narratives of inferiority, for example, assertions that people of color are not in those spaces as a result their capabilities or merit but are undeservedly permitted within those spaces as a result of race-based political interventions, such as affirmative action (see Evans & Moore, 2015; Moore & Bell, 2011). But in other moments White dominion over place and space manifests, as Du Bois (1920) suggests, through more aggressive anti-Black (or BIPOC) forces of control over non-White bodies.

When police were called to the scene of Cup Foods in South Minneapolis on that fateful day in May of 2020, they were summoned because of an allegation that George Floyd had used a counterfeit $20 bill. Video footage from a variety of sources showed that the police who arrived on that scene initiated physically forceful contact with Mr. Floyd from the very beginning of their encounter. In such an interaction and based on the known empirical realities of police brutality and violence against Black Americans, it could be viewed as completely normal for Mr. Floyd to react with fear and a human instinctual desire to protect himself from potential physical harm. In fact, what we see in video footage is Mr. Floyd repeatedly begging the police not to hurt him. Yet his resistance to police physicality violated the assumption of their complete authority and control over his Black body, a fundamental aspect of the White spatial imaginary and its attendant assumptions of absolute White control over place and space. Only a deeply internalized entitlement to White control and authority over the imagined inferior Black body could result in the police in that moment, and commentators thereafter, justifying kneeling on the neck of this man, George Floyd, for 8 minutes and 46 seconds as he cried out that he could not breathe, begged for help, and called for his mother.

Conclusion: Scholarship as Praxis

Racial ideology in the United States provides a societal common sense, or an organizational map as Bonilla-Silva (1997) calls it, that presumes White control and agency over place(s) and space(s) in this country. Through that organizational map, Whites are able to reap disproportionate benefits from social organizations and institutions, as well as social and cultural sites. White spaces provide Whites with the everyday authority and control over BIPOC that allows them to cash in on what Du Bois' (1920) coined the psychological wage of Whiteness. And the corollary to the psychological wage of Whiteness is the unpaid emotional, mental, and sometimes physical labor people of color must expend as they attempt to navigate White space. The burden of this labor is compulsory for non-White individuals as they attempt to reap the rewards of social spaces, organizations, and institutions. This special double issue on White space is designed to lay bare the contours of White space, the mechanisms that produce and reproduce White space, and the burdens that result for people of color as a result of White space in order to elucidate how White space serves as a fundamental mechanism of the reproduction of White supremacy.

In addition to elucidating White space, we set out with the goal of "decolonizing White space" in this double special issue in *American Behavioral Scientist* by challenging the normative boundaries of scholarly publication including deliberate disruptions of mainstream White normative language and form of social science. Within these special issues, you will find empirical and theoretical pieces that engage with race critical theories, but you will find pieces that disrupt traditional White normative forms of social science scholarship. Our contributors draw on the traditions of critical race theory to center the histories and experiences of people of color and include narrative and literary stylistic forms. In addition, in an effort to engage in meaningful scholarly praxis, these special issues include comment articles from practitioners and activists outside of the traditional academic roles of social scientists. These works engage with the social science in these issues to comment on how White spaces plays out in their work, and how we as social scientists may expand the reach of our work to collaborate with those who do the daily work of disrupting White space.

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Notes

1. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/nyregion/amy-cooper-dog-central-park.html
2. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html
3. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/perfect-storm-coronavirus-lockdown-joblessness-fuel-longstanding-grievances-n1222546
4. https://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2020/s0528-coronavirus-death-toll.html. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html
5. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html
6. Note that this should only be a starting point, which lends itself to an interrogation of Whiteness and White domination, but a complete understanding of the racial dynamics of White institutional space must also contain a nuanced analysis of how Whiteness imposes its exploitative gaze on different racial groups differently.

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