



Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA

Research Briefs

June 2017 • Issue No. 11

Spatializing Race and Racializing Space: Exploring the Geographic Footprint of White Supremacy Using Critical Race Spatial Analysis¹

Verónica Vélez
Western Washington University

DuBois (1903) first articulated the notion of the “color-line²” more than 100 years ago. Still significant today, DuBois’ work inspired the development of Critical Race Spatial Analysis (CRSA). First conceived in 2007, CRSA emerged as part of a case study of one of the most robust color-lines in Los Angeles, California – the Alameda Corridor (Solórzano & Vélez, 2007). By utilizing maps to reveal the socio-spatial-historical significance of the Alameda Corridor, this study motivated a pursuit to further digital map-making and other geographic and spatial tools within Critical Race research in education. An evolving framework, CRSA examines the role of race and racism in geographic and social spaces and works toward challenging racism and all forms of subordination within these spaces, particularly those within and connected to schools (Vélez & Solórzano, 2017). Rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT), CRSA spatially explores how structural factors shape racial dynamics and the power associated with those dynamics over time. Within educational research, CRSA is particularly interested in how space is divided, constricted, and constructed along racial lines to impact educational experiences and opportunities.

CRSA attempts to answer the following: 1) How do race and racism shape space, give it meaning, and condition the experiences of Communities of Color³?; 2) How can digital mapping spatially analyze race and racism?; and, 3) What pedagogical possibilities does CRSA hold for teaching and learning about the relationship between race and space?

SPATIALIZING RACE AND RACIALIZING SPACE: A TRANSDISCIPLINARY EXPLANATION

CRSA is informed by transdisciplinary work on spatial theory that includes the well-known work of Lefebvre (1991), Harvey (1990), and Soja (1996, 2010, 2014), and draws broadly from ethnic studies, women’s studies, sociology, geography, history, humanities, and the law, to name a few. Transdisciplinary theorizing on race and space has furthered CRSA’s understanding of racial formations as a product of historically specific geographies (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000). This has illuminated how race-based ideologies produce highly textured, power-laden aspects of space over time and normalize “white” landscapes (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000). Thus, the “inner city,” the “border,” and “the prison,” are as important in understanding the relationship between race and space as the “gated community,” the “safe streets,” and the “good schools.” The impetus for CRSA rests in the belief

that “. . . no geography is complete, no understanding of place or landscape comprehensive, without recognizing that American geography . . . as the spatial expression of American life, is racialized” (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000, p. 392).

GIS: ITS USES, PURPOSE, LIMITATIONS, AND POTENTIAL

In the last forty years, map-making has been greatly facilitated by the use of computerized technologies known as geographic information systems (GIS). GIS software has made it easier to visualize data spatially by constructing maps through layers of information. Despite its many uses, GIS has been critiqued for its exclusive association with quantitative spatial analysis, the politics of representation inherent in maps that limit multiple visions of space, and its historic role in surveillance (Kwan, 2002). Yet, GIS can be renegotiated as a discursive tactic to create “counter-maps,” by encouraging GIS users to complement their quantitative data with other contextual information, and using primary sources from individuals to complement secondary sources that can often over-generalize communities (Kwan, 2002). What this suggests is that critical work using GIS should not just rest on

interpreting maps, but must also be deeply attentive to the actual process of creating them.

“MAPPING” RACE AND RACISM: DEFINING AND APPLYING CRITICAL RACE SPATIAL ANALYSIS

It is important to acknowledge that CRSA is a *conceptual* and *methodological* approach and not simply a spatial analytical technique. The epistemological and ontological implications of geographical research tools, especially GIS, require framing CRSA in this way, although there are several possibilities for how to employ it.

One way is to couple GIS with a grounded theory approach (Knigge & Cope, 2006). Based on the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998), grounded theory involves multiple stages of data collection and analysis. By working to allow theories to emerge from data, grounded theory, in effect, “grounds” itself in the everyday experiences of people. As Knigge and Cope (2006) point out, grounded theory merges nicely with GIS because both attend to small-scale and large-scale social phenomena, as well as specific instances and broader trends in an effort to highlight subjectivity, differences, partial knowledges, and power. This approach maintains a critical awareness of the research process as a political, and potentially transformative

act, embedded in particular socio-historical moments. Furthermore, it aims to conceptualize and theorize about the social world from the lived experiences of Communities of Color by ground-truthing data, whereby the use and perception of space on either side of the color-line is *grounded* in community expertise. CRSA argues that ground-truthing is necessary in map-making, without which data portrayed in maps is hypothetical at best.

Another approach is to merge GIS with *portraiture* – a qualitative research technique introduced by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997). Portraiture seeks to bridge aesthetics and empiricism in order to create a narrative or portrait of a particular group of people within a particular setting. Similar to grounded theory, portraiture seeks to capture the nuances of the social world through rich, textured, detailed descriptions of specific social phenomena. By ensuring that the portraitist is visible throughout the research process, portraiture addresses critiques about the ability of GIS to mask the subjectivity of its users. By seeking to build spatial models of the world from the lived experiences of People of Color, and through its explicit attempt to reach a larger audience through the portrait of a “map,” the merger of portraiture and critical GIS can powerfully serve Critical Race scholars.

These methodological proposals

have informed CRSA (Vélez & Solórzano, 2017; Solórzano & Vélez, 2016), and led to an expansion of its original definition. Although still evolving, CRSA insists on, 1) foregrounding the color-line, underscoring the relationship between race, racism, memory and space, its intersection with other forms of subordination, and its material impact on the daily lives of Communities of Color; 2) challenging race-neutral representations of space by exposing how racism operates to construct space in ways that limit educational opportunity for Communities of Color; 3) focusing research, curriculum, practice, and activism on mapping the spatial expression of the lived experiences of Communities of Color and constructing a socio-spatial narrative that portrays these experiences as sources of strength; 4) centering a transformative solution by re-imagining spatial research and teaching tools that work for racial justice and expands the reach and use of these tools to eliminate subordination in and beyond the academy; 5) utilizing the transdisciplinary knowledge base of Critical Race studies in education as well as visual sociology, critical geography, and radical/tactical cartography to inform praxis, and; 6) emphasizing maps and map-making as a point of departure for analyzing the socio-spatial relationship between

race and space and refusing to allow maps to speak for themselves.

CAUTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES: CRITICAL RACE SPATIAL ANALYSIS AS ANTI-RACIST PRAXIS

A few cautions are necessary concerning the use of CRSA. The first is a recognition that varied meanings are attached to race and racism over different geographic contexts. Because GIS has been criticized as generalizing the spatial realities of one locale to another, it is important to keep in mind that racial meanings are geographically and historically specific. Additionally, it is important to problematize spaces that result from the normalization of “whiteness” as we explore those spaces occupied or important to Communities of Color.

Although CRSA is still developing, it is an anti-racist landscape analysis (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000) that operates not just as a theory but a standpoint from which to engage radical social change. Beyond its applications for research, CRSA is a pedagogical tool, wherein maps can be used as teaching devices to visualize racial divides that often lead to residential segregation, limited access to educational and social services, and jobs. By showing how racism becomes

inscribed in space, CRSA encourages us to consider structural aspects of race and racism that challenge deficit framings of Communities of Color. In addition, with increased availability of GIS technologies, students and others can construct their *own* meaningful maps. By equipping students, teachers, and local community members, Critical Race scholars move from participant observation to active participation *with* local communities to achieve an anti-racist agenda.

NOTES

¹ Together, Verónica Vélez and Daniel G. Solórzano pioneered Critical Race Spatial Analysis, a framework and methodological approach that seeks to deepen a spatial consciousness and expand the use of geographic tools in Critical Race research in education.

² In *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), W.E.B. Dubois first defined and articulated the intersection between space and race as the *color-line*: “Since then a new adjustment of relations in economic and political affairs has grown up . . . which leaves still that frightful chasm as the color-line across which men pass at their peril. Thus, then and now, there stand in the South two separate worlds; and separate not simply in the higher realms of social intercourse, but also in church and school, on railway and street-car, in hotels and theatres, in streets and city sections, in books and newspapers, in asylums and jails, in hospitals and graveyards” (p. 66).

³ “Communities of Color” is intentionally capitalized to reject the standard grammatical norm. Capitalization here represents a grammatical move toward social and racial justice. This rule will also apply to “People of Color.”

REFERENCES

- Du Bois, W.E.B. (1903). *Souls of Black folk*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
- Harvey, D. (1990). Between space and time: Reflections on the geographical imagination. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 80(3), 418-434.
- Knigge, L. & Cope, M. (2006). Grounded visualization: Integrating the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data through grounded theory and visualization. *Environment and Planning*, 38, 2021-2037.
- Kobayashi, A. & Peake, L. (2000). Racism out of place: Thoughts on whiteness and an antiracist geography in the new millennium. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 90(2), 392-403.
- Kwan, M. (2002). Feminist visualization: RE-envisioning GIS as a method in feminist geographic research. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 92(4), 645-661.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. & Hoffman Davis, J. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real and imagines places*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Soja, E. W. (2010). *Seeking spatial justice*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Soja, E. W. (2014). *My Los Angeles: From urban restructuring to regional urbanization*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Solórzano, D. & Vélez, V. (2007). A Critical Race Spatial Analysis Along the Alameda Corridor in Los Angeles. A paper presented at the American Education Research Association Conference, Chicago, IL, April 9, 2007.
- Solórzano, D. & Vélez, V. (2016). Using critical race spatial analysis to examine the Duboisian color-line along the Alameda corridor in Southern California. *Whittier Law Review*, 37, 423-438.
- Solórzano, D. & Vélez, V. (2017). Using critical race spatial analysis to examine redlining in Southern California communities of color—circa 1939. In D. Morrison, S. Annamma, & D. Jackson (Eds.), *Critical race spatial analysis: Mapping to understand and address educational inequity* (pp. 91-108). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Vélez, V. & Solórzano, D. (2017). Critical race spatial analysis: Conceptualizing GIS as a tool for critical race research in education. In D. Morrison, S. Annamma, & D. Jackson (Eds.), *Critical race spatial analysis: Mapping to understand and address educational inequity* (pp. 8-31). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

VERÓNICA NELLY VÉLEZ, is an Assistant Professor and the Founding Director of the Education and Social Justice Minor at Western Washington University (WWU). Her work focuses on Latinx parent engagement in school reform, particularly for (im)migrant families, community-based participatory research in grassroots contexts, and the use of GIS mapping technologies to explore the spatial dimensions of educational (in)opportunity. She received her Ph.D. in Education from UCLA with a specialization in race and ethnic studies.

Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA

1041F Moore Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095
ccrs@gseis.ucla.edu



MISSION STATEMENT

The Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA supports interdisciplinary, collaborative, and policy-oriented research on issues critical to Communities of Color.

Center for Critical Race Studies Briefs. An ongoing series offering research on critical issues facing Communities of Color. Editors: Daniel G. Solórzano & Tanya J. Gaxiola Serrano. Co-Editors: Magali Campos, Cindy Escobedo, Brenda Lopez, Audrey Paredes, Mary Senyonga, and Yadira Valencia.

This Brief Series was made possible in part through funding from the offices of the Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSE&IS). For more information please visit us at www.ccrs.ucla.gseis.edu