

# Racism out of Place: Thoughts on Whiteness and an Antiracist Geography in the New Millennium

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As we enter the next millennium, deeply racialized aspects of U.S. society are increasingly playing themselves out, often in dramatic ways, as expressions of both current tensions and the historical effects of racial formations. So racialized is the development of American society that virtually no social analysis can take place without a recognition of this reality. Similarly, no geography is complete, no understanding of place or landscape comprehensive, without recognizing that American geography, both as discipline and as the spatial expression of American life, is racialized. Racialization is part of the normal, and normalized, landscape and needs to be analyzed as such. In this paper, we explore some of the ways in which that normalization affects the American landscape and how we, as geographers, might better respond to it.

As we were writing a first draft of this paper, on Tuesday, April 20, 1999, a particularly disturbing and catastrophic event was unfolding before our eyes, in the form of television pictures of students of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, fleeing from their school building. Inside the school, twelve of their friends and one teacher lay dead, shot and bombed in a rampage of death inflicted upon them by two of their fellow students. We saw moving pictures of surviving students hugging one another and being hugged by parents and loved ones. These images gave the impression of a tightly knit, family-orientated community. There was a sense of outrage: how could something so horrifying happen to such a normal community? A day later, the identities of those who died were still unclear; the booby trapping of the school by the two students, who had also turned their rifles upon themselves, prevented any search of the school premises. But what was emerging was a disturbing reality that the television images had virtually erased, of a school highly segregated by race and of a murder spree that was at least par-

tially racially motivated. The two white male students had scoured the school looking for specific victims, claiming they were out to kill African-American and Hispanic students, as well as "jock" athletes. Yet the "normal" community that had appeared on our television screens was so encompassingly white; the pictures of parents waiting for their children to emerge from the school were overwhelmingly of white people.

Why do we start this paper by dwelling upon this horrific series of events? Why do we insist that these events are deeply racialized when so much of the discussion that followed the shootings explicitly denied that racism motivated the perpetrators of this tragedy? And why focus on Littleton when there are so many other places in the 1990s—California with its residents' widely differing reactions to the repealing of affirmative action; New York with its high levels of vicious, racialized police violence; Montgomery, Alabama during the bus boycott of 1995; and Los Angeles during the uprising in 1992 that followed the Rodney King verdict—where landscapes are overwhelmed by racist oppression and its effects of violence, poverty, and deep and emotionally charged social divisions? Though these other examples remind us that racism is a product of specific historical geographies, varying across place according to processes such as colonialism, migration, labor markets, and built environments, Littleton reminds us that the *entire* U.S. landscape is deeply racialized, even as its "whiteness" serves as a counterpart to the entrenched differences that mark more highly charged places of racialized conflict. We enter our discussion via the events at Littleton to point out that processes of racialization are present throughout landscapes that are seemingly free from racial tension or diversity. In Littleton, we need to understand the ways in which frustrations over "race" provided a background for the "Trenchcoat Mafia," the student group whose two members committed the murders.

We also need to recognize the ways in which the wider U.S. society glossed over this background, in both media coverage and everyday conversation, in order to focus upon the normalized whiteness of the community, thereby setting Littleton apart from the “ghettoes” of South-Central Los Angeles or the Upper Bronx of New York City. It is the absence, rather than the presence, of racialized faces that is significant in understanding the events at Littleton. Our primary concern, therefore, is with the process of racialization, that is, with the material processes and the ideological consequences of the construction of “race” as a means of differentiating, and valuing, “white” people above those of color. As geographers, we are absorbed by questions of place and boundaries and by the fact that whiteness, as Peter Jackson (1999: 294) suggests, as “an historically specific social formation, shaped within a racialized problematic,” is a profoundly geographic phenomenon. But it is our roles as activists that impel us to disrupt those established attributes of place and the confining boundaries that have literally allowed whiteness to *take place*. Such disruption depends on an analysis informed by practice, and upon forging coalitions of like-minded geographers. We aim not only to understand the processes constructing whiteness, but also to establish means of resisting its effects.<sup>1</sup> With these thoughts in mind, we provide below a rationale for revitalizing and advancing the study of racism, whiteness, and geography.

## Geographies of Whiteness

We take “race” to be a social construction, that is, not a biological essence, but a result of discursive, thoroughly material—and human—social processes (Kobayashi and Peake 1994). The material and the ideological, in this respect, are not separate, nor are they alternative, explanations, but rather two dimensions of human action, ontologically inseparable. “Racialization” is therefore the process by which racialized groups are identified, given stereotypical characteristics, and coerced into specific living conditions, often involving social/spatial segregation and always constituting racialized places. It is one of the most enduring and fundamental means of organizing society.

As critical “race” theorists have pointed out, to understand racialization in the 1990s, we

need to go far beyond a recognition of the deeply disturbing, but limited, results of direct racial hatred, such as violence, racial slurs, and direct discrimination. Racism also involves the manipulation of power to mark “white” as a location of social privilege. Goldberg suggests:

expressions of hate encourage their dismissal as abnormal, not the sort of undertaking ordinary people usually engage in, the irrational product of warped minds. This reduces all racist expression to a single form: What is not reducible to hate is not criminalizable; perhaps it is not even racist (or sexist), for it fails to fall under the reductive characterization of racism (or sexism) as hate. (Goldberg 1997: 20-21).

Yet racist expressions, Goldberg continues, are:

various—in kind, in disposition, in emotive affect, in intention, and in outcome. Moreover, racisms are not unusual or abnormal. To the contrary, racist expressions are normal to our culture, manifest not only in extreme epithets but in insinuations and suggestions, in reasoning and representations, in short, in the microexpressions of daily life. Racism is not—or, more exactly, is not simply or only—about hate (Goldberg 1997: 21).

This understanding of racism as an active process diffused throughout a very wide range of social actions requires, therefore, a way of viewing the wider processes that influence the microenvironment for those expressions. This wider environment we refer to as one of “whiteness,” which occurs as the normative, ordinary power to enjoy social privilege by controlling dominant values and institutions and, in particular, by *occupying space* within a segregated social landscape.

It is no simple task, however, to situate our conceptual categories effectively within a deeply normalized intellectual context, or to pry them loose from the bonds of normalized thinking. The recursivity between the whiteness of the social world, as our object of study, and the whiteness of the discipline, as our medium of study, operates to make opaque the whitening process. This situation sets our epistemological challenge. As Thomas points out:

The strongest of the essentialisms to emerge from the imposition of the grid epistemology is that of whiteness. In its construction against all other differences, it had to achieve a “super-naturalness,” to the point that it becomes invisible, so that all other differences stand out against it. It becomes

the backdrop of nature itself, the omnipotent position of the gaze. As such geography is deeply embedded with “whiteness” . . . . It is one of the disciplines that Europeans used to discover and define others and their worlds. And it is the discipline through which constructed social relations and ideologies are grounded and spatially organized. Deconstructing whiteness is in fact not just about confronting the geography it produces, its spatial absence, or the inability to speak about its meaning, it is also about the very discipline of geography (Thomas 1998: 140).

Frankenberg (1993) recognizes whiteness as having at least three dimensions:

First, it is a position of structural advantage, associated with “privileges” of the most basic kind, including for example, higher wages, reduced chances of being impoverished, longer life, better access to health care, better treatment by the legal system, and so on . . . . Second, whiteness is a “standpoint” or place from which to look at oneself, others and society. Thirdly, it carries with it a set of ways of being in the world, a set of cultural practices, often not named as “white” by white folks, but looked upon instead as “American” or “normal.”

Whiteness, therefore, is a historically constructed position (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996) associated with privilege and power. As such, it is not recognized as being about blackness (for which, read traditional notions of racism), but it has everything to do with not being black, with living in privileged and virtually all-white neighborhoods, with “good” schools, safe streets, and moral values to match. One of the reasons that whiteness is so powerful is that it promotes a rearticulation of racisms of the past. It incorporates some lessons from the civil rights movement, erases racial differences, and pretends that its values apply to everyone. As Omi and Winant (1994: 131) point out, this process is part of a neoconservative position that works:

by limiting the meaning of racial discrimination to the curtailment of individual rights, a distinction that could apply to whites and nonwhites alike. The social logic of race [is] thus rendered opaque without any necessary recourse to explicit prejudice or institutionalized inequality á la the segregation laws of the past.

Whiteness is also a standpoint: a place from which to look at ourselves and the surrounding society, a position of normalcy, and perhaps moral superiority, from which to construct a

landscape of what is same and what is different. It allows other places, whether foreign tourist sites, the world as viewed by major television networks, or Nazi sites on the World Wide Web, to be subjected to a white gaze.

Finally, whiteness is a set of cultural practices and politics based upon ideological norms that are lived but unacknowledged. As a result, it “forecloses [a] broader examination of the present crisis and thereby precludes action to transform it” (West 1993: 39). Whiteness is indicated less by its explicit racism than by the fact that it ignores, or even denies, racist indications. It occupies central ground by deracializing and normalizing common events and beliefs, giving them legitimacy as part of a moral system depicted as natural and universal. In such a system, whiteness is embodied and becomes desire in the shape of the normative human body, for which “race” provides an unspecified template. Geographically, human beings reciprocally shape and are shaped by their surrounding environments to produce landscapes that conform similarly to ideals of beauty, utility, or harmony, values not immediately associated with “race” but predicated upon whitened cultural practices.

## Littleton and the Normative White Gaze

What implications does our understanding of whiteness have for rereading the narratives on Littleton? One theme that emerges from the commentary over the events is a sense that the shootings were an extremist act, completely out of the ordinary run of events, an *aberration*. The “Trenchcoat Mafia” group was similarly depicted as extreme, in contrast to the “jocks” they so resented and despised:

members of a small clique of outcasts who always wore black trench coats . . . . On web sites featuring poetry called “The Written Work of the Trenchcoat” and in political tracts and other elements of the conspiratorial imagination, trench coats serve as a symbol for things from Hitler and the Nazis to mass murder to suicidal fantasies (Fisher 1999).

Fellow students were interviewed extensively, and gave conflicting views. For some, the Trenchcoat Mafia were to be pitied because they had been victimized and taunted by more popular

classmates: "They'd push them up against lockers and call them dirt bags or dirt balls or dirties," noted . . . , a 15-year-old skater. "It must have been hell for them." (Dube 1999). Others were disturbed by them:

"They're basically outcasts, Gothic people," said . . . , a junior who had a confrontation last July 4 with the shooters and several of their fellow members of the 'Trench Coat Mafia,' . . . "They're into anarchy. They're white supremacists and they're into Nostradamus stuff and doomsday" (Fisher 1999: A1).

Others repeatedly comment again that the Trenchcoat Mafia made no sense. "As far as I can tell, this family was utterly, utterly normal," . . . said. "They did everything right. But somehow the pain and anger was too deep, and they didn't see it or couldn't reach it" (Foster 1999).

The words of the other students, their parents and other community members carry a strong message. This was not an urban inner-city school; this was a white school; this was a wealthy school; this was a *normal* school. And so, the perpetrators of this act had to be depicted as abnormal, *individuals* who have deviated from the established norm as individuals, not as products of a particular social context. We offer a very different reading, which is that such "aberrant" acts become possible in a situation where racialization is normalized. Because they were white, members of the Trenchcoat Mafia should not have been different. In order to justify their difference from the "jocks" with whom there was a mutual antipathy, they constructed a competing position of difference, redirecting their resentment towards black bodies.

The earlier racist expressions of the Trenchcoat Mafia reinforced their difference, inscribing upon black bodies a dehumanized status. But they did so at a distance. In a situation where black bodies were relatively absent, their construction was unfettered by everyday interactions. The student killers were net experts, and spent considerable time visiting neo-Nazi internet sites (Ryan 1999). They were reported to have made racist statements about hating blacks and Hispanics and threatening to kill them, frequently wore swastikas on their black trenchcoats, and undertook their rampage on April 20, Hitler's birthday. Yet their internet actions, a virtual reality of a constructed antipathy, bore little relevance to the actual, if equally constructed, environment of Littleton. Perhaps this

unnatural disjunction between the virtual world and the whitened streets helps to explain why suggestions of racist motivation for their acts were quickly quelled in the press after it was reported that only one of those killed was an African-American student.

What is most interesting about this situation is the sense of relief with which, once this fact was discovered, news commentators quickly began to reiterate that the incident at Littleton had not been "racist" after all. Since racism would have provided a logical, even if unacceptable, explanation for their actions, the absence of racism was used in subsequent discourse to underline further the *individual* aberration of what they had done. And yet, there was evidence, played down throughout the media reports, that the family of Isaac Shoels, the African-American student who died, had complained to school authorities about threats from the Trenchcoat Mafia and received, in response, denials that racism was a problem at Columbine (Washington 1999).

This categorization of racism into an extreme category is problematic for critical race theorists, who claim that "racism is normal, not aberrant, in American society . . . an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture" (Delgado 1995: xiv). For most people, including those reporting on the Columbine massacre, racism is naturalized out of existence, and therefore it evades definition in most normative analyses, including those of the popular press. They literally cannot see it.

For this point to make sense, we need to point out that the construction of Littleton as a dominantly white, middle-class—and very normal—suburb is itself a racialized representation, remarkable not for its concentration of faces of color, but for their lack. Spatial racialization thus involves not only relegation of minorities to segregated areas, but the *placement* of *all* people in specific, but highly variable, circumstances. Two corollaries follow. First, the construction of a racialized identity is socially ubiquitous, regardless of what "color" (e.g., "white," "black") designates the construction; in this sense, "white" needs also to be understood as a socially constructed color (Fine et al. 1997: preface). Second, racialization always has a specific geography, and all geographies are racialized.

Moreover, as Delaney points out, "'race' . . . is what it is and does what it does precisely because of how it is given spatial expression" (1998: 18). In

the Littleton case, the neighborhood was widely assumed to be “safe” precisely because it did not carry any of the landscape features associated with “unsafe” areas in American cities. Our analysis needs to be stretched, therefore, across the spatial divide that connects Littleton to its putative opposite, the ghetto, the “Hood,” the no-go area where the urban “underclass” resides. It is perhaps not pushing the point too far to suggest that if the events at Columbine had taken place in an urban school, or had the killers been black, the subsequent explanations, analyses, and stories would have been scripted differently. References to the very personal and aberrant characteristics of the shooters would have been replaced by more generalized, and more obviously racialized, representations of black American culture, epitomized by violence and “dysfunctional” family structures.

In contrast, the media portrayed a vision of peaceful suburbs with functional families. We learned that one of the shooters lived in “an expensive home nestled between a pair of red rock formations in Deer Creek Canyon, west of Chatfield Reservoir” (Bartels and Imse 1999). According to a classmate quoted in this newspaper account: “He had good parents and he had a good family.” Such representations of space and place, involving metaphors that reflect dominant ideologies, reinforce difference and by default, devalue places associated with racialized people.<sup>2</sup> Place does matter, both because social processes such as whiteness are bounded, and because the complex feelings of both racism and antiracism are highly evocative of particular landscapes. The naturalizing discourse on “race” is in keeping with the way the landscape is naturalized as one that should be wholesome and secure.

The above quotations are but one example of how media accounts of the Littleton massacre use normative moral values to shape space and give meaning to place, marking Littleton as a normally safe space and the shooter’s home as morally superior ground located, moreover, close to the salubrious effects of nature. The contrast between the image of the Littleton landscape and the horrific nature of the acts enhances the shock of the events, and emphasizes their senselessness in that context. Indeed, the term “senseless” occurs over and over again in the media accounts, emphasizing the fact that the shootings were *out of place*.

The senselessness takes on some rationality

when cast in light of the extent to which members of the Trenchcoat Mafia were themselves out of place in Littleton. We have no wish, nor are we qualified, to comment here upon their motivations, nor to provide any form of justification of their acts. Our concern is with the racialized context in which the shootings occurred. That context we understand entirely by examining the *public discourse* over the Littleton events, not by addressing the private lives of anyone involved. We would be remiss, however, if we did not point out in passing that the actions of the shooters represent, at least in part, a means of escaping that normalized landscape, and what they viewed as its overbearing, straight, heterosexual strictures. In the days following the shootings, the internet became a site of intense reaction from other internet users who depicted the killers variously as champions of gay freedom, spokespersons for disaffected youth, and gothic heroes asserting their right to be different.<sup>3</sup> A perusal of reactions from these non-mainstream sources on the internet shows the extent to which those speaking “from the margins” of cyberspace present a very different view of the Littleton scene.

Attempts to understand the Trenchcoat Mafia, however, are confused. They point to the lack of consistent philosophy, to the contradictions between the established Goth value of peace and the shooters’ violence, and to the contradictions between what appeared to be a breaking down of sexual barriers and a building up of racial barriers. A classmate claimed, “This is not a total racial issue against any social class. It was just against those people they felt were insulting them, harassing them” (Joseph 1999).

Even more overpowering, however, was the subsequent attempt to normalize Columbine, as part of the healing process for the student survivors. On August 16, 1999, the refurbished school reopened, with students involved in a very noisy rally, chanting their support for the school and each other, shielded from the press by a human chain of parents. We counted the word “normal” used ten times in the ABC coverage of the event, complete with videos and sound bytes broadcast on the internet. President Clinton made a speech in which he exhorted tolerance:

“You live in the most modern of all worlds, and yet the biggest problem we’ve got is the oldest problem of human society: people being scared of

people who are different from them. And you can help that," Clinton told the students, who were selected for the two-day conference by 130 members of Congress. "If you want to live in the new world of the twenty-first century, you've got to help people get rid of their old hatreds and old fears," the president added (Clinton 1999).

Meanwhile, however, the Shoels family, still isolated as the only African-American family involved, had launched a lawsuit against the Sheriff's Department for failing to protect their son. They were subject to intense criticism and ostracism by other townspeople, some of whom insinuated that such action is un-Christian, and against the normative grain:<sup>4</sup>

But some families decided against going to court. "We talked about it—just keeping our options open—but decided not to do it," Shane Nielson, whose wife, Patti Nielson, suffered a gunshot wound, told the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*. The family of Cassie Bernall, who was killed in the Columbine library, reportedly after affirming her faith in God to the gunmen, also did not file a notice. "We just made a family decision," Brad Bernall, the girl's father, told the newspaper ("Legal Aftermath of Columbine" 1999).

Richard Delgado points out that:

a culture constructs social reality in ways that promote its own self-interest. . . . [critical race scholars] set out to construct a different reality. Our social world, with its rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed; rather, we construct it with words, stories, and silence (1995: xiv).

In this case, the public discourse revealed diverse interests, many of them conflicting, but all of them—including those of the Gothic heroes and the middle-class mainstream—depicted in reference to the normative white body. Littleton's events were filtered through a normative white gaze that operated not by emphasizing racial difference, but by exercising the option to write "race," as well as alternate sexualities and other forms of deviance, out of the equation. The silence overwhelms, signaling the privilege of the majority. As David Delaney notes, "[n]ot the least important element of privilege is that white people usually have the option of thinking about race or not (Delaney 1998: 23). The residents of Littleton used that option most strategically.

## Whiteness, Racist Geographies, and Geographies of Racism

As we approach the end of the millennium, how does our analysis of the events at Littleton lead to an awareness of the role of whiteness and normativity in millennial America? Our major conclusion is that the public discourse surrounding the shootings provided a revealing picture of the American landscape. Littleton residents are "ordinary Americans" writ large upon the screens of major television networks. As long as the term "ordinary American" brings to mind an image of white men and women in traditional nuclear families, however, we know that racialization is at work in the popular consciousness, often as a significant discursive silence. That silence, and the fact that the issues of our concern were not made part of popular consciousness in the media coverage, mean that most residents of Littleton may not even recognize themselves in our depiction, a point that reinforces the importance of understanding normativity as that which is unexamined.

The popular images of Littleton signify qualities of the landscape that directly associate people and place, not merely in the creation of interesting cultural formations but as a significant manifestation of the ways in which territory bespeaks power. A few years, perhaps a few months, into the new millennium, the Littleton tragedy will have little currency, but the discursive forces surrounding the events will continue. The marshaling of political interest groups in the wake of the shootings showed not only that one way to maintain hegemony is to write "race" out of the equation, but also that any event that can be nationally staged becomes a means of reinforcing the power of place or, as Clyde Woods suggests, of the ways in which dominant power blocs—at community, regional, and national levels—use racialized representations to maintain "cultural and moral legitimacy, and political and economic hegemony" (Woods 1998: 158).

Moral hegemony is increasingly a matter of not only local, but also national, and even global, concern. Littleton is but one of many American places that need to be understood in light of the constellation of forces at the end of the millennium. The events there are important not only because of the feelings of those town residents most directly affected, but because of the ways in which it became, for a period of

days, a focus of national concern. We need to capture this relationship between the local and the national in a zoom lens that allows a view of the recursivity between local feelings and values and national concerns. Establishing this relationship allows us to understand why Littleton is representative of so many other similar towns, where residents had been asking similar questions in the attempt to understand how vulnerable their own situations might be, thus constructing the divide that separates Littleton from other landscapes, making sense of the fear. The formation of Littleton as the quintessential white suburb where the American dream takes place relies on a series of images that incorporate both a colonial past and the fulfillment of postcolonial desires that is, in so many ways, an expression of the larger American landscape.

Of course Littleton represents only one type of American landscape. Most places are more diverse, and such diversity may challenge normative hegemonic identities. The public discourse surrounding such communities would be quite different given similar circumstances. We need to recognize the local specificity of Colorado as compared to, for example, Alabama (Wilson 1992). But a significant racializing tendency is to conflate the characteristics and experiences of communities of color whose backgrounds can be extremely diverse, and to do so in ways that are charged with local specificity. Groups racialized in one context may as a result be normalized in others, with profound implications for identity formation, citizenship, and civil status. Part of the power of "race" discourse is its ability to take a variety of forms and to adapt to a variety of circumstances.

Strategies of resistance are also diverse. They are expressed through distinctive racialized identities, and take many forms that may range from everyday cultural practices to political movements, and may cover the ideological spectrum. We need to understand how such practices and movements are empowered, how they mobilize diverse internal groups fused or divided by class and gender, as well as the complex relations among such groups. Their objectives, and certainly their results, are often contradictory and need to be understood in terms of the dynamics of place. The horrific nature of the Littleton shootings, however, and the ways in which the media targeted the emotions of readers and viewers, meant that it would

have been very difficult, almost disrespectful, to try to impose an alternative agenda. Normativity often draws upon respect to support its values.

Not only is the antiracist struggle situated, but it occurs most effectively through an engagement of the places where it is most strongly manifested. This engagement involves an understanding of how a variety of social processes comes together in places, as well as how certain places assume more power than others by restricting or controlling spatial access. For example, legislatures, courtrooms, and boardrooms are primary sites of struggle which, because they are powerful, can either perpetuate racism or act as sites of major change. The political task is therefore to situate antiracist struggles in those sites where they will have most effect. Other sites, including the streets and public places, also provide opportunities for struggle and represent complex avenues of access and restriction, but need to be understood in light of their own particular geographies.

A particular feature of the late twentieth century is the power of the visual media, and other forms of electronic communication such as the internet, to represent those particular geographies in ways that minimize the effects of time and space. Witness the overwhelming efficacy of electronic communication in constructing public discourse over the Littleton shootings. There is also tremendous potential for overcoming racism through improved knowledge and communication, and for more equal involvement of diverse social groups and new social movements (and indeed these tendencies are occurring in significant areas) in many places, but enthusiasm for this potential needs to be tempered by consideration of the possibilities for increased polarization and alienation from these very liberating opportunities.

A final consideration is the fact that the racialized landscape, in all its diversity, presents itself in more and more complicated ways for all concerned. While dominant groups attempt to erase such complications through normalizing practices and the construction of essentialist concepts of racial difference, communities of color may engage in coalition building in order to resist the creation of racialized hierarchies. Clearly we need to go beyond simple racialized divides and hierarchies to understand these processes and the ways in which they are given geographical reality.

## Geography and Whiteness

We turn now to geography, to situate this analysis within a disciplinary framework. There is therefore a second justification for our decision to focus on the events at Littleton, beyond its value in pointing out that racialization is as much about absence as presence of people of color. We recognize that our choice of subject matter, while influenced of course by the confluence of events at the time we were writing this paper, is nonetheless unusual. We say this not to make a claim for some kind of exceptional status as scholars, but to emphasize that the story of Littleton as whiteness is one that would not be immediately apparent except to those whose minds are acutely tuned to issues of racialization and to the myriad of ways in which the public discourse is dominated by whiteness. Our disciplinary history is one of near silence on issues of racialization, silence based on an almost overwhelming inattention to the details of racial practice, a silence, in other words, dominated by whiteness.

Geography's agenda is directly or complicitly racist in a number of ways, beginning with a thoroughly racialized disciplinary past. From its origins in exploration and scientific classifications, the discipline played a founding role in establishing the systems of imperialist expansion and colonial power through which the Western world became a dominant center and its white inhabitants became normative, authoritative, and privileged. The Royal Geographical Society, formed in 1830 during the ascendancy of British imperial power, sponsored regular presentations in which concepts of racial difference were legitimated, and nonwhite areas of the world were mapped into marginality and subordination (Livingstone 1993: 166–72; Bassett 1994). The discipline of geography received its own legitimization as a result of the inimitable relationship established between colonial power and the map as a "rhetorical device of persuasion to justify the authority of its practitioners' assertions" (Livingstone 1993:141).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the strongest of imperial geography's metaphors was that of the "moral-climatic idiom" (Livingstone 1993: 139) which, by its naturalization of racial differences according to climatic classifications, placed those of "the dark races" at the bottom of geography's moral terrain.<sup>6</sup>

Geography is a discipline founded, then, on difference and hierarchy. As the discipline has

developed throughout the twentieth century, those foundations have been difficult to shake. The concepts of areal differentiation and regional geography take difference as an article of faith, but fail to acknowledge the implications for creating a racialized geography of America. Since the 1960s, when geographers first began the important task of mapping racial discrimination (Morrill 1965; Rose 1970) those concepts of difference have ironically been reproduced, making it difficult for us to get beyond essentialized notions of "race" (Dwyer 1997), in order to highlight the complexity, the historical contingency, the fluidity and the richness of even the most extreme, and therefore painful, racialized circumstances.

The contemporary discipline remains insufficiently critical of its past, and therefore reinscribes many of the racialized metaphors upon which it was established. The preoccupation with space, for example, often reflects the modern concept of territoriality and the positioning of dominant groups, instead of recognizing that such outcomes are deeply implicated in the rationale of a spatial organization of society based on Enlightenment notions of imperial civilization. Part of the agenda for the new millennium, therefore, must be the pressing need to make considerations of racialization a fundamental aspect of geographical understanding, in much the same way that more and more geographers have recognized that no human geography is complete without a consideration of gender.

This objective requires that we "unnaturalize" geographical stories in which the effects of racialization are left out or normalized (Kobayashi and Peake 1994). This agenda presses not only because of the theoretical need to recognize racialization as fundamental to social formation, but also because the effects of racism represent a serious threat to the well-being and safety of racialized people. The rise of white militia groups, the repeal of affirmative action legislation, the increasingly strident voices of right-wing "white" parties (such as, for example, the Australian One Nation Party), and the continued persecution of Jews in mainland Europe all point to violent possibilities in which it is not possible to claim, as happened in Littleton, that racism is not a factor.

White people's lives, including the lives of dominantly white geographers, are sites for the reproduction of racism, but they also hold the potential of being strategic sites of resistance.

We have to find the “places of contradiction” (Frankenberg 1993) in all of us in order to revision whiteness. White people need to work through “‘unnaturalising’ ourselves . . . by re-examining our own personal histories and geographies, and praxis. ‘Unnaturalizing’ ourselves means engagement in practical political work . . . [because] . . . [u]nlearning racism . . . is not the same as ending it” (Frankenberg 1993:82). Unlearning the whiteness of geography is a difficult but important goal.

For Young (1990), “the extreme difficulty in shifting racist patterns of thought, many of which are reproduced unconsciously, requires a more fundamental revolution in subjectivity, affirming otherness in ourselves” (Walter 1999: 228). For white people, this means replacing an inadequate sense of personal culpability with that of a social and historic responsibility for whiteness (Peake and Trotz 1999). It means understanding not only the social locations of “others” but also of being able to name one’s own location. To what purpose? To account for the specific effects of social and political practices and their meanings; not subscribing to them but reassessing and representing them.

How do we move towards that postcolonial moment of being free from colonial inscription, of changing what it means to be white, or at least being open to the possibility of a radical white identity? (Peake and Trotz 1999). Frankenberg exhorts that white women have to teach each other about unlearning racism and not to expect women of color to do the work for us/them. We concur, however, with her belief that: “None the less, the painful truth is that white feminists are content to ‘forget,’ to ‘not think,’ and this means that the bulk of antiracist work is being done by people of color” (Frankenberg 1993: 80). There is the need for continuous interrogation of our own projects.

The possibilities for such interrogation are extensive, provided, as our analysis of Littleton shows, that we can identify and interrogate spaces of silence, thus challenging the normativity accorded to “white” landscapes. They lie in reopening a view of past landscapes where the terms of today’s normalization were laid down (Blunt 1994), in critiquing the ways we encounter “difference,” juxtaposing international conditions against a whitened center (McEwan 1994), in connecting the oppression of “race” with other forms of oppression (Walter 1999) and in questioning the ways in which whiteness

is imposed upon our subjects in the field (Kobayashi 1994; Peake and Trotz 1999: ch. 2). They also lie in working closely with communities and with a range of geographers to create multi-racial alliances and to respect a variety of experiences (Peake and Trotz 1999: ch. 9; Robinson 1994), and to recognize the value of negotiated representations (Radcliffe 1994). As Robinson (1994: 221) states: “Crucial here is the displacement of both the questioning researcher and the questioned research subject: the exploration of the intersections among subjects involves the interrogation of all subjects involved in research and the displacement of the privileged fixed position of the ‘same’ from which the author/researcher speaks/writes and interrogates.”

As activist geographers, it is just such self-referential assessment that we hope to provoke. Critical race theory is fundamentally transformative; it is “theory” only in the sense of providing a standpoint from which to engage social change. It is therefore as much about how to achieve political ends as it is about what “race” is and how racism works. There is a huge and growing theoretical literature from a critical perspective, much of which does not sufficiently recognize the role of geography (in all senses of that term) in structuring both the conditions of racism and the possibilities for change. On the other hand, geographers have had recent and fairly limited engagement with critical antiracist theory, and further exploration will help to dispel any lingering notions that an antiracist geography can be narrowly conceived according to an agenda based on spatial distributions (Bonnert 1997). At the very least, a spatial interpretation needs to take into account “empty spaces,” that result from silence, exclusion, and denial, and that serve as a basis for reproducing normative whiteness. We believe that the geographical contribution here is important, and potentially can serve to bring about social change.

It is also important that, as geographers, we understand the ways in which social change is occurring at the beginning of a new millennium when the means of communication are shifting so rapidly, with concomitant changes to time/space experience. The events at Littleton are significant not only because they have been interpreted through a lens of white normativity, but because that lens is so powerfully connected to new forms of communication, particularly through the internet. The Columbine shootings

represent the biggest domestic news event of the year, made bigger through a vast network of internet activity. We uncovered hundreds of tributes to the victims, gigabytes of analysis by amateur as well as professional writers, a conveniently indexed site devoted to the Littleton Massacre on ABCNews.com, complete with an interactive map that allows the viewer to move through the events in the high school and experience them through virtual reality, reels of archived media coverage that brings all the events back to life for anyone with a computer equipped with RealPlayer, not to mention coverage by underground newsgroups whose interpretations are profoundly disturbing in their potential violence. The power of these media to redefine the popular sense of place, to engage emotions at a national scale, and to direct discourse over normative human relations is profound. In a context where whiteness has prevailed as the dominant ideology, the potential either to challenge or to reinforce that ideology exists in more powerful ways than ever before.

In this sense, our own analysis therefore behooves us to question our contention that the quest to normalize Littleton involves a complex and overwhelming preoccupation with the "same." Have we the right to impose such an agenda on the citizens of Littleton? In response, we can only point out that our analysis has been limited to public discourse over the shootings. We would need to undertake a very different, in-depth and on-site analysis to understand the kinds of changes actually taking place among those citizens. But it is fairly clear, nonetheless, that those changes did not involve significant, at least publicly expressed, challenges to the normativity of whiteness, and the self-referential questions that such a challenge would involve.

The events at Littleton show us that social change is not necessarily encouraged through dramatic or traumatic events. If anything, dominant ideologies were reinforced, not challenged. The residents were too concerned with getting back to normal to even think about how normal might be reenvisioned. For this reason and many others, therefore, we hope that the rather apocryphal tone that pervades millennial thinking is not also apocalyptic. We do, however, see the dramatic and often violent events of the 1990s as powerful expressions of the fears and prejudices that permeate everyday life, and that give place to normative views of the world in landscapes that are only ordinary until they

undergo the kind of tragedy witnessed recently in Littleton.

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## Notes

1. We wish to reiterate that first and foremost we are antiracist activists, engaged in various ways with racialized communities, and intimately involved in working across racialized differences. One way of achieving our aims is through academic scholarship, which has the advantages of involved reflection, informed critique, and access to means of communication with the geographic community. Such scholarship should be viewed fundamentally, however, as a form of activism engaged in everyday struggles. Such struggles are our own. We also need to position ourselves. We are both Canadian, but our complex identities include being a new Canadian (Linda) and a woman of color (Audrey). Inevitably, these identities affect both the ways we construct the world and the ways we are ourselves constructed. Our location in Canada and the Canadian multicultural context shape our perspectives on the issues of race and geography in Canada, in the U.S., and globally. As Canadians writing a paper about American society, however, we also need to position ourselves as outsiders to that society, engaged in international research.
2. Perhaps the most obvious of such metaphors involves the "heart of darkness" and the construction of evil, ineffability and inferiority of the world's "dark" people.
3. This material is highly variable, and some of it is quite violent. It was available on the internet and in newsgroups for a short period, before authorities moved to block use of URL addresses with the words "Trenchcoat" or "Trenchcoat Mafia." Since it is not our primary aim to analyze this particular response to the events in Littleton, we have chosen not to provide references to the URL addresses here.
4. Again, we are concerned here with the insinuations around Christianity in the media report, not with the beliefs or motivations of the family concerned.

5. An American example of such imperial geographers is Isaiah Bowman who, as Director of the American Geographical Society during the early twentieth century, wrote extensively about the putative inferiority of racialized people (Bowman 1926; Livingston 1993: 252). Such views formed an integral part of his later, highly influential work with the U.S. State Department, where his was a major voice in pushing for the creation of an American "Lebensraum for all" (Smith 1994).
6. The intellectual products of imperial geography had their spatial parallel in the creation not only of global relations of dominance, but of racialized communities in colonial settings, for example, by the spatial marginalization of peoples in Africa (Lester 1988); by the wholesale movement of peoples as chattels to build the Canadian railway; and by the designation of racialized groups, regardless of location, to globally recognized hierarchies of color and class.

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