How do bodies matter? understanding embodied racialised subjectivities
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Issues of materiality and their relation to racist practices continue to represent a key issue of concern for any theorisation of the ongoing operations of racial categories. In my own work I continue to be challenged to find ways to talk about racial categories without contributing to their reification. Two brief examples may serve to illustrate this point more clearly.

Following the series of celebrity big brother held in the UK earlier this year, I felt it important to at least begin a project of piecing together some sort of analysis of how Jade Goody's behaviour against Shilpa Shetty signified the complex operations of race, class and gender at the very heart of empire. Yet in writing about Goody’s evocation of the term ‘Shilpa Poppadum’, I couldn’t help but feel that my writing was mirroring the behaviour of Goody herself when, in her exit interview, she repeated the term in her account of her behaviours and in her apology for using the term, only to be told by an audience member ‘well stop using it then’. When watching the interview I felt that the audience member had made an important intervention into the repetitious functioning of race talk by highlighting the ways in which the very evocation of racist words continues to enact hurt. How, then, was I as a white academic to analyse Goody’s behaviour without myself continuing to wield the very categories that were deployed so viciously against Shetty? In regards to the second example, I refer to an experience last year of marking exam papers, the task of which was for students to analyse a media report about the mapping of the human genome and its implications for the supposed ‘biology of race’. Repeatedly I read the work of students who (for the most part) deftly provided examples of interpretative repertoires or particular rhetorical structures that were evident in the extract. Yet at the same time I felt a distinct dis-ease with the ways in which the very terms upon which the extract was premised (i.e., the refutation of race as a biological fact) seemed to perpetuate racial categories precisely in their refutation. This was not something that I had originally identified as a ‘marking point’ when I began reading the exams, yet the inadequacy of my marking system was brought home when only 1 student out of 150 actually identified the problematic way in which the author of the extract refuted the existence of race as a biological category, only to then go on to use existing descriptive categories that have historically been taken as referencing biologically racially different groups of people (i.e., ‘Caucasian’). This made me question how it is that we teach students to challenge ‘race talk’, and how the provision of particular analytic tools (such as those of discourse analysis) may fail to adequately equip students with ways of ‘seeing’ the reality of race as it plays out in everyday ways.

In what remains of this paper I extend an argument I initially begun elsewhere in order to begin the work of thinking through some of the ways in which the materiality of race is played out, and how we might talk about this in ways that move beyond simply recounting one of two common ‘yes but’ mantras: either beginning with an understanding of race as a social construction but then demonstrating its social reality, or beginning from ‘real’ examples but then deconstructing their facticity. Instead, I suggest that what is required is an account of race that attempts to bring both of these understandings of race together in ways that acknowledge that race has a materiality that is partly to do with the aspects of racial discourse that are constructed as being material (i.e., stereotypes about bodily markers), and partly about the ways in which bodies come to matter on particular racialised terms. In other words, although it must be recognised that racial categories are the result of particular power relations and histories of oppression, they are nonetheless constructed as mattering - they are accorded a materiality that renders them foundational to subjectivities. Thus it would seem important to me that an anti-racist practice involves not only challenging racist stereotypes, but also challenging the very frameworks of subjectivity upon which race is made to matter. Moreover, examining how race matters not simply in the lives of those who are typically rendered visible within normative discourses of race (i.e., those who are racially marginalized), but how it is central to the lives of those of us who occupy racially dominant positions, would appear to be key to examining how racial discourses continue to circulate.

Racialised Embodiment

One of the ways in which I (amongst others) have attempted to understand the materiality of race is to
develop an understanding of the networks of power in which racial discourse circulates. As a starting place in this regard, I would suggest that the subject who comes into being under the sign of race is one that is prescribed by the hierarchical forms of knowledge that are deemed intelligible within the framework of race itself - only certain bodies are ascribed with power, at the expense of those bodies positioned as being without (or unable to have) power. Racialised differences are thus achieved primarily through sets of contrasts, wherein the racial other is marked as ‘having race’, whilst the white self is not marked as raced. This is what Fanon\(^1\) termed ‘epidermalisation’, or as Hall defines it: “the writing of difference on the skin of the other”.\(^2\)

I would suggest also that epidermalisation marks the practice whereby difference is actually constructed on the terms of the same - racialised difference is built upon the incorporation of incommensurable difference into a logic of sameness. Hook suggests much the same thing in his incisive analysis of the racial stereotype, where he expands and clarifies the work of Bhabha.\(^3\) Hook, following Bhabha, suggests that the racial stereotype represents an attempt at achieving the impossible: “the fixity of mutually exclusive subject categories for colonizer and colonized”\(^4\). In this sense, ‘recognising’ racial difference actually has little to do with ‘seeing’ difference, and more to do with incorporating a range of bodily forms into a cartography of racialised embodiment that is organized through a logic of sameness. In this logic all people are defined according to a set of terms that are constructed as mattering by those in positions of power or by those with investments in maintaining social hierarchies. To ‘see’ ‘racial difference’ is thus not to actually see differing bodies, but to see bodies as fundamentally marked by a particular way of viewing, with a particular emphasis on certain aspects of embodiment.

My point here is thus not to posit an objective point of racial difference - such an argument would be counterproductive to a critical understanding of how racial embodiment is produced. Rather, my point is that the co-option of difference (marked in this instance as race) into a logic of sameness (through, for example, the racial stereotype of the other), serves to mask the incommensurable differences that in actuality undermine white hegemony, and thus render visible its limitations as an absolute site of power in the materialization of race. This leads me to suggest that, under the signifier of whiteness, discourses of race thus do not function to ‘describe’ the differences between people, but rather operate to incorporate these differences into one particular way of understanding the world. Thus as Alcoff\(^5\) suggests, race as a practice of visibilisation works to “enclos[e] the entirety of difference within a taxonomy organized by a single logic”. This point therefore demonstrates the importance of examining how race is materialised, and how it is used to legitimate practices of oppression.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler provides a useful reading of Foucault’s work on the prison. Whilst not talking about race, the following passage draws interesting and useful parallels with the materialisation of race:

> The materiality of the prison, Foucault writes, is established to the extent that (*dans la mesure ou*) it is a vector and instrument of power. Hence, the prison is materialized to the extent that it is invested with power. To be grammatically accurate, there is no prison prior to its materialization; its materialization is coextensive with its investiture with power relations; and materiality is the effect and gauge of this investment. The prison comes to be only within the field of power relations, more specifically, only to the extent that it is saturated with such relation and that such a saturation is formative of its very being. Here the body - of the prisoner and the prison - is not an independent materiality, a static surface or site, which a subsequent investment comes to mark, signify upon, or pervade; the body is that for which materialization and investiture are coextensive.\(^6\)

This passage from Butler usefully draws our attention to the ways in which subjective investments in whiteness function through the materialisation of race, and how this demonstrates the ways in which race is materialised in the service of white dominance.

To elaborate: if, following Butler’s logic, there is no ‘race’ prior to its materialisation, and if this materialisation occurs through the investment of race with power, then it would seem important to grasp how materialisation occurs concomitantly with subjectification. In other words, how is it that the materialization of particular bodies as mattering occurs as a result of their location within ongoing histories of domination, and how does this position such bodies as products of practices of subjectification that occur within racialised networks of power?
Towards the end of the passage Butler suggests a potential answer to this question, namely that “the body… is not an independent materiality… which a subsequent investment comes to mark… the body is that for which materialization and investiture are coextensive”. In regards to race, then, the racialised body does not exist outside of a particular context, nor does it become racialised upon the choosing of particular individuals. Rather, in the context of nations built in the context of empire, bodies come to matter precisely as markers of race that are used to shore up the project of empire. Bodies must thus be invested with race as a prerequisite for intelligibility within nations that are founded upon racial difference (and its ascription of racial hierarchies) as the primary site of their legitimation. The question is not then whether the racialised body is brought into being through racialised networks of power, and is then inhabited by a subject differentially invested in said power (or vice versa), but rather that bodies are spoken into being specifically as racial bodies - as bodies whose existence relies upon the corollary of particular subjective investments in the project of empire. In regards to subjectivity, then, the racialisation of bodies is the very grounds for subjectification - we come into being as knowers/subjects or objects in the form of particular racialised bodies.

It is important, however, to acknowledge here that this may at first seem to be a rather overdeterministic reading of racialised embodiment, and one that subsumes the experiences of those who are marked as racial others yet again into a logic of ‘difference in sameness’, whereby racialisation occurs in the same ways (and for the same purpose) for all people. This is not my claim at all. Instead, my point has been to mark precisely how those bodies that are typically not designated as racialised under white hegemony (i.e., white bodies) come into being through discourses of race. This, I would suggest, was a large part of Fanon’s project - not to maintain a focus on how the white man constructs the black man, but how the white man constructs the white man through his constructions of the black man. Racism, and the investment in racialised practices (such as the materialisation of race) are thus formative of white subjectivities as material practices.

The important point that arises from this understanding of racial subject formation and its material affects, then, is how the racialisation of white subjects is for the large part denied (in order to legitimate the a priori status of white privilege) by focusing on race as a ‘regime of looking’, whereby the white subject (rendered intelligible within networks of racialised power) does the looking, rather than being a recipient of a racialised gaze. Thus as Seshadri-Crooks suggests,

> although race cannot be reduced to the look… it is common knowledge that some ‘black’ people can be very white, and some ‘whites’ can be very dark; identity is a question of ‘heritage’, not skin colour. Once claimed, however, heritage is ultimately marked by the body… thus by visibility I refer to a regime of looking that thrives on ‘major’ and ‘minor’ details in order to shore up one’s symbolic position.7

The desire to control the gaze (and to do so by controlling what counts as ‘major’ and ‘minor’ details) thus demonstrates what I (along with Martha Augoustinos) have termed elsewhere the ‘anxiety of whiteness’.8 That is, whilst on the one hand there would appear to be a desire to ‘be whiteness’ (to occupy the site of the signifier), such a desire is predicated upon an illusory notion of wholeness - that those of us who are white could exceed the racialised categories of whiteness, and thus occupy all positions (or more accurately, deny any position other than the ‘whole white self’) within a racialised system of representation. Yet the paradox (and thus anxiety) is that such a fantasy of wholeness would effectively obliterate constructions of difference, resulting in the destruction of the self/other binaries that racialised systems are reliant upon.9 In this way the ‘double nature’ of white anxiety is always already evident in the ways in which the gaze circulates as a purported site of power. Obviously this is not to deny the ways in which the gaze does exert effects over racially marginalised people, but instead my point is that attempts at controlling racialised looking through marking particular bodies as ‘raced’ is always an incomplete project - it never totally encompasses significations or representation.

**Conclusions**

In this paper I have attempted to map out one particular understanding of how race is materialized, with particular reference to the formation of white subjectivities and their fundamental inculcation in racialised networks of power. My intention has not been to deny resistance to white hegemony or the potential for anti-racist practice, but rather to account for the materiality of race in ways that move beyond either constructionist or realist accounts of racial embodiment. My aim has been to examine race as **constructedly fundamental** - it is fundamentally constructed as mattering to embodied subjectivities. Whilst
‘race’ as a category may well be a convenient fiction that serves to legitimate social hierarchies, it is nonetheless one that operates as a reality. Talking about race as fundamental in this way allows for an account of racism that sees it as functioning in all aspects of subjectivity, rather than as an add on or as only relevant to particular forms of analysis.

To return to the two examples I provided in the introduction, then, any examination of the operations of race, class and gender in the celebrity big brother household requires not simply the recounting of how racial categories were deployed by Goody, but also an extrapolation as to the location of those categories within histories of empire that serve to render them intelligible, and which produce particular racialised bodies that are played out through the materiality of talk. In other words, it is not necessarily all that productive to solely either examine the bodies of Shetty and Goody and the ways in which they functioned as racial markers in the celebrity big brother house, or examine the racist talk of Goody. Rather, it is important to examine how racialised embodiment was materialized through the talk of Goody and the other British women in the house. In this sense, race comes to matter through the collective actions of people who locate themselves as holding the authority to mark race, an authority that comes precisely as a result of their preceding racialised materiality (as explained above with reference to Butler).

With regard to the exam marking I undertook, it is important to recognise how our pedagogies may serve to both render visible racism, and yet also render invisible the banal operations of racial categories and their materialization of race. Examining race in talk requires the examination not only of the specific discursive resources that speakers draw upon in order to warrant racial privilege or racist actions, but the ways in which this produces an embodied racialized subjectivity that is warranted through the simultaneity of the speaker’s cultural location and the content of the speaker’s talk. Embodied subject positions are thus not reducible to specific forms of talk, nor are they extricable from it.

In conclusion, then, examining the materiality of race continues to be an important area of study precisely because of the complexities of race as a category and its thorough imbrication in the formation of subjectivities in the context of empire. Challenging racism requires the ongoing theorization of these complexities, with specific attention to the ways in which materiality occurs in conjunction with the formation of racial subjects.

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Notes


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