

Spatializing blackness in New Mexico

By

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Abstract

This essay explores how blackness is spatialized in the state of New Mexico. Drawing upon spatial theory concepts like: peripheralization, practices of containment, and surveillance, I examine how the segregation of blackness has always been integral to the state's identity and has therefore had an impact upon the development of Black Studies at New Mexico's public universities. This paper takes seriously the call to move beyond a Black/White binary by considering antiblack racial politics in multicultural and racially diverse contexts. I conclude by critiquing the normative ways in which cultural diversity paradigms circumvent the goals of education for liberation—a foundational element of Black Studies.



Three People's Mural by Kenneth Adams (1939). Represents the three cultures of New Mexico: Anglo, Hispanic and Native American. Murals are situated in the main hall of Zimmerman Library at the University of New Mexico.

In February of 2018, the Albuquerque Journal published a story about a conflict surrounding a public art exhibit at the University of New Mexico (<https://www.abqjournal.com/1128938/new-course-for-an-old-conflict.html>). The Three Peoples Murals was completed in 1939 by artist Kenneth Adams and is comprised of several large panels which sit prominently in the main campus library. These murals have stirred quite a bit of controversy over the years, with arguments both for and against their removal. In the 1970s the murals were defaced on multiple occasions, only to be repaired and re-displayed with each occurrence of vandalism. The murals are said to represent the three cultures that have contributed to the multicultural formation of the state of New Mexico. These cultures are: Anglo, Hispanic, and Native American. Though the public narrative explicitly focuses on each group's cultural contributions, I argue that the murals tell a story about the racial imagination in New Mexico- The Land of Enchantment. More specifically, I argue that despite the invisibility of people of African-descent, an imagination about the threat of blackness unquestionably shapes how racial formation is remembered and multiculturalism is practiced in the state.

During the spring of 2018, the University of New Mexico's College of Fine Arts organized a class around the study of public art, with a focus on the murals. Some of the guiding questions related to the murals included: Do the murals accurately depict the state's multicultural history? Do the murals intentionally leave out the contribution of other groups, namely African Americans? While I am open to the conversation that the murals make invisible the contributions of African Americans to the state's history, I am far more concerned with how the murals, like other public art exhibits throughout the state, sustain a spatially situated racial mythology with an ever present theme about a *threat of blackness*.

In her book, *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison (1992) cautions against assuming that blackness is not part of the imagination, even in those spaces that are presumed to lack a significant presence of Black people. I draw upon that awareness here as I disentangle the spatialization of blackness in New Mexico. How, for example, has blackness been imagined despite a narrative that eliminates Black people, and ultimately blackness, from the historical memory? George Lipsitz (2011) argues that the white spatial imaginary is organized to define White space as exclusive of Black people. Imagining White space as superior space has always been predicated upon the removal of Blacks from the spatial environment. Lipsitz (2011) states,

A white spatial imaginary based on exclusivity and augmented exchange value forms the foundational logic behind prevailing spatial and social policies in cities and suburbs today. This imaginary does not emerge simply directly from the embodied identities of people who are white. It is inscribed in the physical contours of the places where we live, work, and play..." (p.28).

Lipsitz makes a case for how Black people have been segregated from physical spaces in order to preserve the purity of whiteness. However, I want to think about this in relationship to how blackness is imagined in the process of that exclusion.

Rashad Shabazz (2015) adds another element for how we might think of the anti-black spatial imagination. He suggests that practices of containment have always been part of Black experiences. In his study on antiblack spatial practices in Chicago he notes that, “Surveillance, policing, and containment continues to be the fabric of Black environments” (p. 4). The question I am concerned with here is, how does this also come into play with environments where Black people have represented what some might regard inconsequential part of the population? New Mexico is unique in that it has long held the title of being a Hispanic majority state. Hispanic-identified people represent about half of the state’s overall population. Native Americans represent another 10% of the state’s population. New Mexico has the 4th largest Native American population in the United States. Anglo Whites represent around 38% of the total population. African American or Blacks represent less than 3% of the overall population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Much of the discourse surrounding Black people in New Mexico would have you believe that Blacks simply have not been part of the state’s landscape and thus are not part of the state’s identity formation. Historical narratives typically situate Black people in the New Mexico landscape as Buffalo Soldiers, part of the military, transient cowboys traveling through the territory or as part of Spanish colonial convoys.

Given these small demographics, and a public narrative about a lack of Black presence in the state, I speculate about whether blackness in New Mexico has also been “surveilled, policed, and contained” to the same degree as Rashad Shabazz highlights about major urban cities like Chicago? How does a Black geography relate to the particular context of New Mexico? Is anti-black racism mapped into the spatial imagination? In New Mexico one frequently hears that there really has been no significant anti-black racism because Black people have not really been part of this state’s history--at least not to any large visible degree. So then, will we still find that the “mundane practices of [black] containment” that Shabazz speaks of, still exist in a place where people of color are the majority and Blacks have always been less than 3% of the state’s total population?

I wish to engage with geographer, Sherene Razack’s (2002) notion of spatial mythologies. She asserts that, “Mythologies or national stories are about a nation’s origins and history. They [mythologies or national stories] enable citizens to think of themselves as part of a community, defining who belongs and who does not belong to the nation.” Additionally, this can be applied to thinking about spatial and racial politics within New Mexico. Razack argues for “unmapping” environments in order to establish how “worldviews become embodied with the geography.” I place this in conversation with Toni Morrison’s charge that we look deep into stories to see how the anti-black imagination works. This requires us to ask questions like, how did the space come to be represented as it has? How does anti-blackness enter into multicultural and diversity representations of spatial environments? How do non-Black multicultural spaces function? Razack (2002) notes that we must attend to not only the symbolic, but the material as well. So, while I analyze instances of the antiblack imagination in the history of New Mexico, I also attune to its trajectory over time and space, as well as its material legacy by examining the quite specific consequences of an antiblack spatial imaginary by discussing the challenges facing

the development of Black Studies in a multiculturally vibrant but yet racially exclusive space like New Mexico.

Black in the New Mexican spatial imagination

Given the public narrative about the absence of blackness from the region, the state has had a rather long history of Black exclusion that was either coded into law or part of social norms and public practices. New Mexico has maintained a long history of both de jure and de facto antiblack racial discrimination. Though the region did not rely on an African-based slave economy, as did the U.S. South, the question of African-based slavery was important during the pre-statehood era. New Mexico's Mexican and Anglo political elite thought that by aligning with U.S. pro-slavery factions, the territory would be better positioned to make a claim for statehood. Additionally, for elite powerful Mexican families, the introduction of African enslavement would resolve the issue of the contentious hold on whiteness that Mexicans have long held. In her book, *Manifest Destinies*, Laura Gomez (2008) notes Mexican elites thought that the introduction of African slavery or at least aligning with pro-slavery interests would potentially strengthen Mexican claims to whiteness (Gomez, 2008).

Another structure that functioned to contain Black bodies in the state was the introduction of New Mexico's Slave Codes (Stegmaier, 2013). It is important to remember that the New Mexico Slave Code of 1859 was legalized even though Black people were scarcely present in the territory. These codes took notes from how similar codes operated in other parts of the United States. The codes protected the property rights of White slaveholders but more than that, they institutionalized a standard of relations and drew boundaries between Blacks and *all* non-Blacks. For instance, Blacks who resided in New Mexico were not allowed to enter into legal unions with Whites or Mexicans. These laws were similar to anti-miscegenation laws throughout the country that made Black and White marriage illegal. Black men convicted of raping a White or Hispanic woman were subject to a hanging. At one point it was legal for slaveholders to track and recapture enslaved Blacks who had entered the free territory of New Mexico. Also, it was illegal for any free person to assist in the escape of any enslaved person. Free Blacks who migrated to the territory were only legally allowed to stay for 30 days (Gomez, 2008; Stegmaier, 2013), which essentially served to limit free Blacks from relocating to New Mexico. Part of the New Mexico's racial mythology suggests that Blacks never really attempted to migrate to New Mexico and that this was just happenstance. The reality is that there were periods of time when Blacks were legally restricted from settling into the region. New Mexico's Slave Codes of 1859 highlight the methods and strategies for containing and restricting blackness in the region. On another level this highlights how the Black Codes did not solely separate Black from White but Black from White and Mexican. They tell a story about differently racialized bodies and while many of the laws were directed towards enslaved Blacks, the fact of blackness meant that this narrative of dis-belonging was inscribed upon the bodies of free Blacks in the territory as well.

A third formation, and more contemporary formation of spatial containment, can be found in the housing covenants established in cities like Albuquerque and its surrounding communities as late as the 1970s. These covenants prevented homeowners from selling their homes to Black people. Though anti-black housing covenants were delegalized during the 1970s, the lingering effects of these policies are still present today, as these same neighborhoods

which boast higher property values remain largely non-Black. This supports Rashad Shabazz's premise that "surveillance, policing and containment are the fabric on Black environments" but more importantly, given the context of New Mexico--it also the fabric of environments where Blacks are not a significant population. The attention to blackness challenges the often repeated anecdote that blackness has not been part of the New Mexico racial imagination.

Just as blackness has been fundamental to the formation of the United States, so too has it been paramount for racial formation of New Mexico. In this next section, I consider the impact of the state's racial formation on the emergence and growth of Black Studies in the university. Specifically, how does public discourse surrounding an absence of blackness also contribute to the dismissal of Black Studies as relevant intellectual thought at the university? How does Black Studies challenge traditional multicultural diversity approaches, such as those found in New Mexico?

Implications for Black studies

The Africana Studies program at the University of New Mexico is the first and only Black Studies program in the state. It has been in existence since 1970. Rather than place New Mexico outside or as unique in the field of U.S. race relations, the founders of the UNM Black Studies program suggested that New Mexico attempted to hide its race problem behind a veil of a myth of multicultural tolerance. It is noteworthy that even though the Black student population was small, the struggle over Black Studies at the University of New Mexico included direct action, sit-ins and other forms of social protest (Simmons, 1970). The program was developed with the promise of departmentalization in the near future. Fifty years later this promise has not been fulfilled. The program remains marginalized as compared to other ethnic studies units. Outside of the University of New Mexico, there are no other Black Studies programs in the state, though there was an attempt in the early 1970s to create a statewide Afro-American/Black Studies consortium that would include advocacy for expanding Black Studies programs into the various public universities throughout the state (Simmons, 1970). Today we continue to ask, how does Black Studies claim its rightful position as legitimate intellectual thought in an environment where Black people are not part of the "relevant" cultural heritages that define the identity of the state and its mythology? It is apparent that we must disrupt the deployment of cultural relevance paradigms in the university while simultaneously promoting the values and goals of Black Studies.

Black studies as uniquely situated to challenge New Mexico's race politics

A Black Studies approach to education is grounded in the philosophy that education must serve the practical purpose of liberation. Bell hooks (1994) notes that education *should be* the praxis of freedom. A recognition of education as the praxis of freedom has been at the center of Black Studies, even when there has been differences of opinion on how this praxis should unfold. That is to say, the educational context must be organized to prepare the learner to confront and respond to real world circumstances of injustice and work towards social change. For people of African-descent education has often been a site that informed our radical political consciousness. Educational spaces have often informed our sense of peoplehood, our cultural identities, and develop insight into resisting oppression. Educational spaces have often

been the places and spaces where we connect to a diasporic sense of community. The theoretical frameworks that ground Black Studies challenge American notions of democracy and reject an epistemology of assimilation as useful for people of African-descent. Black Studies works to uproot and disrupt: white supremacy, white racial privilege, racial discrimination, colonialism/neo-colonialism, imperialism, and anti-blackness (Cole, 2004; Harris, 2004). Understanding the formation of these processes and how they impact upon Black life and deny Black humanity is at the center of Black Studies. Black Studies approaches education from a set of values and commitments that are atypical to how universities attempt to situate Black Studies programs into cultural diversity frameworks.

Black studies has often been caught between politics of peripheralization and politics of containment. Containment happens in the more obvious ways such as, universities not investing in Black Studies programs, maintaining Black Studies as a program rather than a department, building Black Studies on adjunct and lecturers rather than tenure-track/tenured faculty, reducing budgets and even denial of adequate space for program operations. However, containment is also often achieved through more benign efforts--like positioning Black Studies within diversity projects/agendas, which ultimately undermines Black thought as legitimate intellectual space. Today, diversity is packaged as if a menu item that can be consumed. This is the kind of discourse that could be situated alongside other diversity projects that urge students to travel and learn about *Other* cultures—akin to a study abroad program. Learning about other cultures does not challenge the antiblack racial structure. In fact, it may actually do more to reinforce it as students begin to about Black studies as nothing more than touristic exploration of another group of people.

In New Mexico there is an additional challenge because Black people do not “qualify” as a cultural group. New Mexico’s ethnic culture is envisioned as those people who have maintained traditions, ritual practices, a spiritual relationship to land, and most importantly, non-English speaking languages. In New Mexico, African Americans are thought to lack these characteristics. In New Mexico there is a preoccupation with the question of authenticity. What counts as an authentic and thus legitimate cultural attributes is that it existed during Spanish colonialism or predates that colonialism--as in the case of Native American communities. African Americans are viewed as culturally deficient since African American cultural heritage is thought to be simply an outcome of enslavement--making it relatively new, in comparison to other groups in New Mexico. A critical engagement with this fact requires that we disrupt the normative ways many colleges and universities approach who/what is culturally relevant. The way that many colleges and universities approach diversity initiatives tend to collude with the existing racial mythology. In New Mexico it is not just that Blacks are made invisible but it is also that Black culture has historically been thought of as a contagion in the United States. The consequence is that the same spatial boundaries that we see demarcating Black from non-Black bodies is also erected in perceptions about what or who is culturally relevant. I find it useful to think about Rima Vesely-Clad’s (2017) work where she describes how blackness has historically been perceived of as a social contagion and that this idea buttresses how Blacks are framed as morally and intellectually inferior. This is also part of how Black people are imagined culturally. This imagination about Black cultural inferiority is part of the same mythology. One of the consequences is evident in *how* Black Studies is incorporated in the university setting.

It is important to note that New Mexico's sense of cultural identity is additionally informed by an orientation to Latin America. Blackness as threat has also been part of the Latin American social and political landscape. We see its evidence in Latin America's *casta* structure, which was also part of New Mexico's early history. A Spanish colonial system included an intricate *casta* system establishing a complex racial order including Africans and those who occupied mixed racial categories. *Mestizaje* consciousness acknowledges a mixed racial history and an African root is indeed part of that heritage (Vasquez, 2010). How does this creation of boundaries between racial groups also situate the development and sustainment of cultural identities? Sustainment is important here because it a process that continues to reproduce images that frame an imagined narrative about the environment. One would have to also believe that Native American, Chicana/o, Hispanic and Mexican cultures are devoid of an African influence/heritage. *Mestizaje* consciousness is also deeply embedded in anti-black sentiment that persists throughout Mexico today (Sue, 2013). This too has left an indelible mark upon racial consciousness in New Mexico. For example, Tanya Hernandez (2004) documents the dismissal of a Black root, in favor of an Indian origin, in Chicana/o consciousness in the American West. This denial not only engages in distancing from African Americans but also from Black Latin Americans, Afro-Chicanxs and Afro-Natives--it is a totalizing exclusion of blackness.

Black Studies in a geographic location like New Mexico has to be uniquely positioned to challenge the expression of anti-blackness within a multicultural mythology. However, we must also acknowledge that anti-blackness has a strong undercurrent in New Mexico's socio-political history and that this extends to how Black Studies is regarded as foreign intellectual thought *occupying* space at the university.

Conclusion

The challenge for Africana Studies is to disrupt the cultural relevance arguments that are used to displace the field of study from the academic spatial landscape. This means challenging the "normative" ways culture is constructed to deny people of African-descent relevancy in New Mexico. Whereas other ethnic populations, like Chicana/o, Hispano, Mexican and Native American confront other challenges of belonging in New Mexico, they do not have to confront the challenge of being quite literally eviscerated from the space. Their numbers and visibly public history in the state, attest to a sense of cultural belonging. The challenge for Africana Studies is to disrupt and resituate how we make sense of what cultural relevance means in any space. For example, while African Americans represent a much smaller demographic statewide it is obvious from the historical record that an imagined threat of encroaching blackness pervaded state politics. This signifies that African-descended people were ever-present in landscape, even when their physical presence was relatively small, as compared to other racial groups. One of the questions we must ask is, how did this fear of Black trespass inform identity development and even racial consciousness of all other ethnic populations in New Mexico? It is not that groups develop cultural identities and form group consciousness in isolation, but that these senses of belonging in relationship to cultural identities take shape in relationship to other groups that either belong or dis-belong.

Rather than a retreat from Black Studies, there needs to be more of an investment in Black Studies to truly compel the university to a more radical vision of culturally relevant

pedagogy. This means a full deconstruction of how we understand culture and how we define intellectual contributions... Black Studies is poised to do this in unique ways that are often overlooked by universities. It is a unique epistemology that takes seriously the charge to be socially responsible to not only students but the larger community beyond the college campus. Black Studies requires that we place groups in social context relative to one another and not in silos of isolation. That allows for a more full spatial analysis of racial and ethnic relations across time and space.

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