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Mapping Black Geographies
Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers (2024): 1-6.

1 On escaping maps

I have spent much of my career as a geographer running away from maps.

When I introduce my undergraduate sociology students to critical human geography, I aim to show that space is not a blank slate upon which human activity unfolds; instead, it is actively *produced* through power-laden processes. As such, space is always a site of struggle and contestation. From there, we discuss how spatial arrangements and representations can (re)produce oppression and inequality—and how oppression and inequality are in turn reflected in spatial arrangements and representations. We do this by comparing typical crime hot-spot maps with *The New Inquiry*'s "White Collar Crime Risk Zones" tool (Clifton et al., 2017) and then reflecting on the ways maps can be used to naturalize racialized constructions of criminality and legitimate carceral intervention. "Maps lie!" I declare, referencing Mark Monmonier's (1991) classic contention that the "lie" of the map is in fact its defining feature rather than a fluke to be corrected through ever-more precise cartographic representations. There is no foolproof method for representing the three-dimensional sphere of the Earth on a two-dimensional plane, so any attempt to do this will involve choices and compromises with political implications. One of my favorite pedagogical moments occurs when I ask students to recall the map they used in their primary and secondary school classrooms (in most cases, a Mercator projection) and then compare its representation of landmasses to their actual sizes using thetruesize.com. This simple exercise is a handy way to introduce the idea that there is no singular, objective view of space—space comprises everyday practices, lived experiences, abstractions, official representations, and so on.

But beyond this, my skepticism of the map (and the expectation that geography is synonymous with cartography) is tied to mapping's entanglement with nationalism and colonialism. In the second edition of *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (2006) acknowledges that his initial formulation of nationalism, which focused on the shared experience of homogenous empty time facilitated by print-capitalism, "patently lacked its necessary coordinate: changing apprehensions of 'space'" (p. xiv). He credits this insight to the Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul (1994), whose work demonstrates that cartography is central to nationalist projects. The technology of the map naturalizes the "geo-body" of the nation and its territorial boundaries as primordial and unchanging geographic features, akin to mountains and oceans. And the map is also a colonial technology. Anthropologists have long reckoned with their discipline as a handmaiden of colonialism, but Stephen Legg (2017) also reminds us that "the geographical discipline has…been exposed as a handmaiden of empire, providing its experts, maps and institutions" (p. 345). Efforts to render space legible, smooth, and rational through cartography are central to violent conquest and dispossession; colonial maps also displace alternative, indigenous modes of spatial representation (Mundy, 1996).

When working on an early draft of my monograph *Contesting Race and Citizenship* (2022), which investigates emergent Black diasporic political formations in Italy, I attempted to design a

map that highlighted Italian cities with large Black populations. But this was, I quickly realized, a fool's errand. For one, the Italian government does not collect race-based data in its national census—a legacy of post–World War II fears that the state collection of data on racial minorities could reopen the door to fascism, eugenics, and genocide. While there have been insurgent attempts by antiracist scholars and NGOs to estimate the size of Black populations in continental Europe, these efforts involve tricky triangulation across data on foreign-born populations, naturalization rates, and so on. But even beyond the problematic question of "accuracy," I was forced to reckon with my own positivist impulse to enumerate and map—to render Black Italianness visible, especially at a time of increasingly virulent racial nationalisms, xenophobia, and outright anti-Black violence.[1] What would this map disclose, and what complexities might it obscure? To what uses might it be put? My goal, after all, was not to "shed light" on a hidden population. Quite the contrary—I argue in *Contesting* that the Black presence in Italy has also been rendered hypervisible through border fortification, surveillance, xenophobic political campaigns, and everyday and state racisms. So, I threw out the map.

Figure 1 The "map" on the cover of *Contesting Race and Citizenship*

There are just a handful of maps that remain in *Contesting*. Two are from Italian racial theorists Cesare Lombroso and Giuseppe Sergi, which I included to show how Blackness was quite literally mapped in relation to the boundaries of Italianness and Europeanness after Italian national unification. The third shows trans-Mediterranean migration routes; I read this abstracted depiction of migratory "flows" against the grain to emphasize the colonial echoes in journeys undertaken by Eritrean asylum-seekers who cross Libya on their way to Italy. And while there is

[1] There are, of course, political contexts in which cartographic visibility is a powerful strategy, as Gautam Bhan's commentary in this special issue demonstrates.

a map of sorts on the cover of my book, I took great delight in the artist's choice to design a pointillist map—a Europe of multicolored dots perpetually suspended at the brink of evaporation or fragmentation (*Figure 1*). After all, just as I found it impossible to map Black Italy, it is also impossible to map Europe. Stuart Hall (1992/2018) reminds us that the "West" is an historical rather than a geographical construct, and I teach my students that the same can be said for Europe (p. 142). The notion of a shared Europeanness (whether articulated in terms of race, religion, or culture) is a relatively recent and contested historical phenomenon—and in any case, one could map Europe in a myriad of contradictory ways. Is Europe a continent or a subcontinent? Is Europe one of many non-isomorphic political unions, or is it defined by who competes in the Eurovision Song Contest—in which case, Europe would also include Israel? What about the Caribbean territories and departments of the UK, France, and the Netherlands, or the hyper-fortified Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla? And where does Turkey—once seat of the Roman Empire and perpetual European Union member-in-waiting—fit into these maps?

2 Black geographies and the politics of mapping

My thinking about mapping has been deeply informed, and pushed in new directions, by the field of Black geographies. Katherine McKittrick (2011) argues that "black diasporic histories and geographies are difficult to track and cartographically map" (p. 949) because transatlantic slavery relied upon—though never fully accomplished—the erasure of Black spatiality. Still, as Jovan Scott Lewis and I (2023) observe, the discipline of geography has a long history of attempting to cartographically "fix" Blackness, literally and metaphorically,

> "…whether in the attempt to define and essentialize Blackness as a racial category through Enlightenment-era environmental determinisms, with the mapping and cataloging of African lands in conjunction with European imperial ventures, or—more recently—via "deficit-model" analyses of spatial segregation in urban Black communities" (p. 6).

A great deal of critical scholarship has sought to create new maps that reveal the workings of spatial violence against Black communities: environmental racism, carcerality, gentrification, displacement, health and food access disparities, border violence. But there is a danger here, too. McKittrick (2014) warns that when we look to an archive that is forged in anti-Black racism, we remain constrained to reproduce stories wherein "black is naturally less-than-human and starving to death and violated; where black is naturally dysselected, unsurviving, swallowed up" (p. 16). This is why Clyde Woods (2002) cautioned against a geography of race that renders scholars mere "academic coroners" whose rusted tools "can only be used for autopsies," and who unquestioningly assume that the patient before them is already dead (p. 63). Black geographic scholarship is more than an inventory of dead and dying Black communities. A Black sense of place, as I understand McKittrick (2011), foregrounds alternative Black spatial knowledges and mapping practices that have always exceeded racial-spatial violence.[2]

The Glissantian (1997/2010) opacity of a Black sense of place defies the pretentions of transparent space—the notion that "the world can be seen as it really is and that there can be

[2] See, for instance, Alderman and Inwood (2023) on the *Living Black Atlas*, "an intellectual framing used for capturing a dynamic and always emerging historical geography of resistant Black cartographic practices" (p. 2).

unmediated access to the truth of objects it sees" (Blunt and Rose, 1994, p. 5; McKittrick, 2006, p. xv).[3] So, how does one map the "unmappable" (McKittrick, 2007) of a Black sense of place that is inherently subversive, interstitial, relational, insurgent?[4] The essays in Lewis' and my edited volume *The Black Geographic* (2023) provide a glimpse into the possibilities of Black geographic (counter)cartography. In different ways, each contributor engages with mapping as a material and poetic process. Some examples: Danielle Purifoy (2023) observes that "our maps could never contain all the livingness" of Black spaces in Lowndes County, and so collaborates with artist Torkwase Dyson to depict "fugitive Black spatialities" (p. 42). Artist Sharita Towne weaves photographs, maps, archival documents, and excerpts of text into experimentally maps of Black spatial imaginaries. Chiyuma Elliott (2023) imagines poems as maps, and Judith Madera argues that literary texts and narratives can chart abolitionist geographies that disrupt the basemaps of empire. Ampson Hagan (2023) highlights the countermapping practices of Black migrants against state surveillance and border fortification. CNE Corbin (2023) and Anna Brand (2023), writing about Oakland and New Orleans, respectively, critique the ways planning maps naturalize the erasure of Blackness from urban spaces. And Matthew Jordan-Miller Kenyatta (2023) asks how datasets can be read against the grain to map Black urban joy. These maps suggest that cartography is not always oppressive (as Abushama and Cheshire also demonstrate in this special issue); instead, in the spirit of Black "fugitive and maroon maps, literacy maps, food-nourishment maps, family maps, music maps" (McKittrick 2011, p. 949), mapping can also be a poetic method for defamiliarizing the spatial workings of power and envisioning more just relationships among people, land, and resources (Gilmore 2022, p. 474), nonhuman life, and nonliving matter.

3. Mapping Black Mediterranean geographies of racial capitalism and abolition

I also situate my work within Black European studies—a field that makes powerful interventions into the study of the Black diaspora by considering relations of power and the politics of knowledge production across diasporic sites. Scholars of Black European studies ask challenging questions about how the United States is often taken for granted as an ideal type or starting point of comparison in conversations about the global Black diaspora, such that Black European histories, politics, and subjectivities are invisibilized or subordinated. Michelle Wright (2015) characterizes this, in a sense, as a problem of mapping. She explains that "our *constructs* of Blackness are…specifically based on a notion of spacetime that is commonly fitted into a linear progress narrative" (p. 4), a "temporal convening of space" (Massey, 2005, p. 69) that begins with traumatic dispersal from the African continent and progresses teleologically from slavery to freedom. The "spatiotemporal properties" of this Middle Passage Epistemology, Wright argues, overdetermine how we theorize Blackness and can "preclude a wholly *inclusive* definition of Blackness, yielding one that is necessarily inaccurate" (pp. 4).

[3] I am reminded of a provocative article by urbanist Robert Gioielli (2022) on the way those famously "technicolor" Homeowners Loan Corporation redlining maps might in fact obscure more than they reveal.

[4] This complexity can be seen in the multivocality of the "plot" in Black geographies—simultaneously a parcel of land allotted to some enslaved people so they could grow their own food and thereby subsidize their own social reproduction, a story or narrative, and a plan for escape (McKittrick, 2013; Roane, 2019; Wynter, 1971).

Drawing on this tradition, my work argues that we should not view the Black Mediterranean as merely derivative of the more extensively-studied Black Atlantic. I draw inspiration from Cedric Robinson (1983/2000), who located the Mediterranean at the center of the global history of racial capitalism. This move was not an attempt to recenter the Mediterranean Basin as the cradle of European civilization, but a countermapping strategy akin to C.L.R. James (1963/2023) looking to the Caribbean or W.E.B. Du Bois (1935/2013) looking to the U.S. South as vantage points from which to theorize the entanglements of racism and capitalism as well as the possibilities of revolution. As I attempt to situate Black Italy *on its own terms* within the global Black diaspora, however, I am careful to avoid the reification of static spatial categories. Instead, it is important to attend to intertwined histories of racism and colonialism that defy borders and bounded geographical comparisons. How, for instance, can we understand Italian national unification and U.S. Reconstruction as part of the same historical moment—thus locating W.E.B. Du Bois and Antonio Gramsci as two differently-situated theorists who used this conjuncture to theorize labor and citizenship, difference and solidarity, imperialism and fascism? Or, how do we approach the transnational circulation of theories of race and crime between the United States and Italy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? These interconnected histories of racialized dispossession, displacement, and confinement point the way toward alternative and more capacious mappings of transnational "abolition geographies" (Gilmore 2022)—for instance, connections between calls for police and prison abolition in the United States and calls for border and immigrant detention abolition in Europe. Relational maps of racial capitalism can challenge the methodological nationalism that fragments social movements and, in doing so, highlight the urgency of internationalist struggle and transnational solidarity.

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