

August 2022

The Dehumanizing Gaze: Race in the Context of Academic Tourism

Leona DeRango
University of Puget Sound

Follow this and additional works at: <https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/thecommons>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Politics Commons](#), [Prison Education and Reentry Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeRango, Leona (2022) "The Dehumanizing Gaze: Race in the Context of Academic Tourism," *The Commons: Puget Sound Journal of Politics*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/thecommons/vol3/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Sound Ideas. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Commons: Puget Sound Journal of Politics by an authorized editor of Sound Ideas. For more information, please contact soundideas@pugetsound.edu.

THE DEHUMANIZING GAZE

RACE IN THE CONTEXT OF ACADEMIC TOURISM

LEONA DERANGO

For the heart of the matter is always somewhere else than where it is supposed to be.

Trinh Minh-ha

Facts are not created equal: the production of traces is always also the creation of silences.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot

This miseducation would involve the deliberate, ethically sanctioned production of ignorance in folks of all races, too often with concomitant dehumanizing notions...

Lucius Outlaw

[It] is we in academia who alone hold the key to the definition of race, and therefore to the classificatory logic of the acronym N.H.I.

Sylvia Wynter

I start with critical theorist Sylvia Wynter because I have questions. How can we understand the classificatory logic that is produced through education? How does education play a role in insistent dehumanizing? How can we hold disciplines of knowledge accountable for these dehumanizing classifications? How do we undo and relearn what race is? Sylvia Wynter seeks to find a response in academia, in language, and in the classification of “No Humans Involved (NHI).”¹ NHI is a classification of marginalized individuals that reduces the humanity of such individuals, which produces a conscious gaze of dehumanization.²

In this essay, I will explore the definition of race in the context of academic tourism and the dehumanizing gaze that it casts. Academic tourism is the inspection of others' trauma in the name of hands-on learning. This is a practice that forces students and teachers to learn about experiences of harm with the intent of “diversifying education”, usually without doing the work to unpack or think critically about the history in which such experiences are rooted. Academic tourism has appeared in my own educational experiences and persists in educational programing, workplaces, and popular culture. Our understanding of the dehumanizing gaze is informed by concepts that have been explored by Toni Morrison and bell hooks on the white gaze: an expectation that whiteness is present, observing, therefore marking importance. Morrison spoke in opposition to the white gaze, advocating for the empowerment of Black narratives rather than the appeasement of white-centered or white-serving narratives that blanket American society.³ In “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators”, hooks discusses the historical

trauma of white slaveholders’ “repression” of Black spectatorship by banning Black slaves from “staring” at them, and how “looking” in present-day contexts connotes defiance of historical “domination strategies” deployed by white people in power.⁴ I intend to only brush the surface of these topics through the sharing of some examples of how silence, ignorance, and power work together to perpetuate systems of dehumanization and the dehumanizing gaze.

First, I will discuss how ignorance in our education system makes us complicit in the dehumanizing gaze.⁵ I will think through this by reflecting on my own ignorance in the classroom. I then will move to examining how history produces not only facts, but silence.⁶ Such silence reinforces ignorance and the denial of the dehumanizing gaze. Connecting to historical events, I will then interrogate the injustices of the Philadelphia MOVE bombing in 1985 and the treatment of the bones of a Black child. Lastly, I will argue that, through silence and ignorance, the dehumanizing gaze is reinforced. This can be seen in education in educational programs within our American carceral system, and the ways in which non-incarcerated and incarcerated individuals interact to create systems of control and invasion through the dehumanizing gaze.

I revisit the question: what is race? In the context of the dehumanizing gaze: race is silence, ignorance, and power. They build off each other to oppress, control, and invade the way we think, act, and belong in society. Embedded in my argument are explorations of the disciplines of anthropology, history, and philosophy, in addition to reflections on experiences of my own with and within education and educational systems.

IGNORANCE: WHO AM I?

It is important for you, my audience, to know where I am coming from. I am a white, cisgender woman from a middle-class family. I attended public school in St. Paul, Minnesota and now study African American Studies at the University of Puget Sound. My definition of race is informed by my socialization as a white person in American society. Therefore, I have chosen to narrow my focus of race to discuss how people are complicit in racialization that perpetuates a dehumanizing gaze. We have been taught and socialized as white people that we are non-racialized—this is not true. We have the privilege and comfort of being part of the dominant society to see ourselves as the standard and non-racialized, whereas people of color are almost always seen as “having a race.”⁷

I am jumping back to 2018. I am a high school senior at Open World Learning Community taking AP U.S. History. I walk into class and the room is rearranged. We are told that we are going to learn about the trans-Atlantic slave trade by engaging in an activity. “Oh, fun,” I think, “A break from sitting at a desk and listening to a lecture.” My teacher splits our class into groups and asks us to “travel” around the classroom. Each corner of the classroom

represents a different part of the transatlantic slave trade: one corner is Europe, another Africa, and another North America. Walking around the classroom to different corners, we pretend that we are participating in the historical exchange of manufactured goods, such as tobacco and guns, for slaves.

At the time, this activity seemed like an exciting way to engage with course content. However, educational role-playing of this kind preserves the production of ignorant knowledge. As philosopher Lucius Outlaw points out, “Education became a principal means by which to affect the production, mediation, and legitimation of ignorance-sustaining knowledge, via schooling especially, that would achieve this defining and ordering.”⁸ My teacher was ignorant of the harm that “touring” Black trauma of trans-Atlantic enslavement by way of touring, not thinking critically, about Black slaves’ organization and “ordering” within in the economy could cause. Through her position of relative power, she chose, perhaps from a place of ignorance, to present a racialized narrative as a statement of fact, which thus imparted “ignorance- sustaining knowledge” unto students as a matter of meeting curricular objectives. Today, I ask myself, “How did I not know?” I did not know because I was taught not to know. Knowledge is power, but in the center of epistemological power lies ignorance and silence.

Looking back on that day in my AP U.S. History class, I realize today that I was complicit in this production of ignorant knowledge that led to the “defining and ordering of race.”⁹ At the time, I did not think twice about the activity at hand: in fact, I was excited and eager. I did not object to or critique my teacher. Unwittingly, I participated in “touring” Black trauma in the form of an interactive history lesson. I was not taught how this traumatic history constructs our current racial realities. The historical narrative of “dehumanization” was silenced and controlled through ignorance right before my eyes. Critically, the teacher of my AP U.S. History class was a white woman, and most, if not all, of my peers were white. The presence of the white gaze stripped Blackness and Black people of humanity and spun it into a subject of study just as several Ivy League universities did when they offered an archaeology course in which a Black bombing victim’s bones were unethically examined for “educational” purposes.

SILENCE: LIES BEHIND THE IVORY TOWER

In April 2021, an anthropology course titled “Real Bones: Adventures in Forensic Anthropology” was suspended when the silences of the past erupted a conversation about the origin of the bones and their longstanding ownership by the Ivy League. In May 1985, the Philadelphia Police Department bombed a residence located in a primarily Black neighborhood in West Philadelphia. Residents included members of the MOVE Organization, an anarchist organization which participated in communal living.¹⁰ Six adults and five children, all Black, died due to a fire caused by the bombing. Decades later,

official representatives of Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania issued statements admitting to the storage, use, and exchange of the remains of an unidentified child from the MOVE bombing over a nearly forty-year period.¹¹ Studying the child's remains became a part of the aforementioned "Real Bones: Adventures in Forensic Anthropology" course offered at Princeton University.¹² Revelations about the provenance of the child's remains rocked Philadelphia's activist communities and survivors of the 1985 incident, some of whom were unaware of the location and unauthorized use of the child's bones until mid-2021.¹³

A review of such history prompts several questions. Why do the Black bodies and voices in this story not have ownership or control over their own narrative and physical bodies? How is it that, in the past few years, we are only now dealing with the consequences of the mismanagement of this horrific event? How is it that we live in a world that allows Black trauma to be a form of education?

The broad answer can be racism. However, there are more intricate factors at play here that enabled the "Real Bones" course to be taught. The existence of the course relied on the complicity and trust of enrolled students not to question the content, on the willful ignorance of staff and faculty involved in its approval and administration, and on the construction of silences that were not intended to be uncovered.¹⁴ The reproduction of ignorant knowledge allowed Princeton University to keep telling dominant historical narratives that keep oppressed knowledge in the dark.¹⁵ The silences that were created alongside a culturally revered system of knowledge production — Ivy League institutions — kept the remains of children from their families and in the hands of prestigious universities that perpetuated the teaching of ignorance for decades. In turn, these universities reproduced the dehumanizing gaze and the oppression of Black Americans.

POWER: EDUCATION IN THE AMERICAN CARCERAL SYSTEM

Through silence and ignorance, power is produced: the power to invade, to control, and to oppress. An example of this can be found in the American carceral system and its relationship to education. In 2018, a two-year community college in the Midwest offered a course associated with the Sociology Department in which non-incarcerated students engaged with course content alongside incarcerated students. The course description included some of the following language: "[s]pend time in a correctional facility", "earn 3 credit hours while you do it", "...[will be] unlike any class you have ever had."¹⁶ This course advertisement was an explicit form of academic tourism. While the course itself may have promoted integrative experiences between incarcerated and non-incarcerate students, the language of the advertisement seemed to portray the course as a "hands-on" experience for the education of the non-incarcerated. The language implied that non-incarcerated students would be going into a prison setting and interacting with

incarcerated individuals as if those individuals themselves and the conditions of their incarceration were objects of study. While there are ways to go about dual-status education in a productive way, it is difficult to find a balance when we talk about the way that we value imprisoned people's lives. Similar to Princeton University and its treatment of a Black child's bones as an "adventure", this higher education institution framed the dehumanization of Black bodies as a unique educational experience for non-incarcerated individuals.

Our current prison system is an intentional replication of slavery. Central to the prison system's continued existence is legislation and common epistemological practices that result in high arrest and incarceration rates of people of color, as well as the redefinition of incarcerated individuals' citizenship rights comparable to that of slaves. Additionally, private prison industries embedded within the larger carceral state profit from an incarcerated person's slave status and a steady supply of people to be incarcerated. Building off of this concept, I argue that, due to the station and situation of incarcerated individuals relative to those of the non-incarcerated students, students coming into the prison for educational purposes would be able to assert their assumptions and knowledge over inmates and further enforce their power in the hybridized classroom-prison setting. This can be seen in the way that these two identities are socialized in terms of their respective senses of self. In prison, the "insider" incarcerated person is stripped of their previous identity and fundamental liberties and intrinsically linked to their crime. The "outsider" student, conversely, enters the prison setting positioned to seek out self-fulfilling, identity-affirming opportunities, as they are invited to "...explore themselves and their worlds as college students and to try new things."¹⁷ This dichotomy projects an inherent power dynamic between non-incarcerated students and their incarcerated counterparts, and adds to the dehumanization of people in prison through "educational invasion." When students are not able to access the silenced knowledge and see the lineage from slavery to prison, knowledge and ignorance are produced, reinforcing traumatic and repetitive power dynamics within educational settings. This power is silent, able to go undetected. However, as Trouillot tells us, when there is a creation of facts there is also a creation of silences.¹⁸

CONCLUSION: CARE AND HUMILITY

When thinking about the topic of race and when trying to define race, the heart is always present. We lie to ourselves when we claim that there is no emotion or feeling behind an action or a thought. I circle back to the example of faculty members at Princeton University administering an anthropology class centered around the examination of human remains of a Black bombing victim whose family did not consent to such use. The intention of faculty members at Princeton University could have been to provide unique

educational experiences. Such a course could have been a source of departmental pride, or could have satisfied genuine scholarly curiosity. However, its impact has engendered different feelings: anger, mistrust, and dehumanization. There is always some type of heart in the matter. This idea of “intention versus impact” is prominent and important when dealing with issues of the heart. It is ignorant to assume the impact of something because with every intention is silence, which is something that we do not know, and feelings that are unaccounted for. Now, I will state my intention and look for the impact.

I have connected silence, ignorance, and power in the context of academic tourism in hopes of showing how race and its classificatory logic are dehumanizing. There is not a single root of the dehumanizing gaze. To identify a single root is ignorant in and of itself. One must see the many routes that have led us to face the same issues of “unhumaning” time and time again. Keeping bell hooks’ musings on Black spectatorship and power in mind, we must meditate on “the ways power as domination reproduces itself in different locations employing similar apparatuses, strategies, and mechanisms of control.”¹⁹

Even as I write this paper, I am complicit in this dehumanizing gaze, even if it is subconscious. It is my goal to chart this awareness and take responsibility for the silences, ignorance, and power that I have been taught. Outlaw writes, “We need among other things, a very substantial reeducation and redirection of knowledge workers and knowledge work in academic philosophy.”²⁰ I need to be reeducated. Therefore, I have chosen to pursue a degree in African American Studies to challenge myself to think critically about the whys and hows, as well as to implement a new lens of awareness and humility. We all need to be asking the question: what is it that I do not see?

DeRango: The Dehumanizing Gaze: Race in the Context of Academic Tourism

END NOTES

- 1 Sylvia Wynter, "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues," *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (1994): 1.
- 2 Wynter, 13.
- 3 *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*, directed by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders (2019; New York: Magnolia Pictures, 2019), Hulu.
- 4 hooks, bell, "The Oppositional Gaze Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.
- 5 Outlaw, Lucius T, *Social Ordering and the Systematic Production of Ignorance* (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2007), 197.
- 6 Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 29, ACLS Humanities E-Book.
- 7 Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (2011): 60.
- 8 Outlaw, 200.
- 9 Outlaw, 200.
- 10 Levenson, Michael, "Discovery of Bones from MOVE Bombing Jolts Philadelphia Once Again," *New York Times*, May 15 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/15/us/philadelphia-move-bombing-cremation.html/>.
- 11 Levenson, "Discovery of Bones from MOVE Bombing Jolts Philadelphia Once Again."
- 12 Levenson, "Discovery of Bones from MOVE Bombing Jolts Philadelphia Once Again."
- 13 Levenson, "Discovery of Bones from MOVE Bombing Jolts Philadelphia Once Again."
- 14 Trouillot, 24.
- 15 Outlaw, 200.
- 16 Erin L. Castro, and Mary R. Gould, "What is Higher Education in Prison? Introduction to Radical Departures: Ruminations on the Purposes of Higher Education in Prison," *Critical Education* 9, no. 10 (July 2018): 6.
- 17 Castro and Gould, 8.
- 18 Trouillot, 29.
- 19 hooks, 115.
- 20 Outlaw, 210.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Castro, Erin L., and Mary R. Gould. "What is Higher Education in Prison? Introduction to Radical Departures: Ruminations on the Purposes of Higher Education in Prison." *Critical Education* 9, no. 10 (July 2018): 1–15.
- DiAngelo, Robin. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (2011): 54–70.
- Greenfield-Sanders, Timothy, dir. *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*. 2019. New York: Magnolia Pictures, 2019. Hulu.
- hooks, bell. "The Oppositional Gaze Black Female Spectators." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, edited by Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, 115–131. Boston: South End Press, 1992.
- Princeton University. "Legacies of Violence and Complicity ~ Current Policies and Guidelines." Last modified August 31, 2021. Accessed September 26, 2021. <https://anthropology.princeton.edu/news/legacies-violence-and-complicity-current-policies-and-guidelines>.
- Levenson, Michael. "Discovery of Bones from MOVE Bombing Jolts Philadelphia Once Again." *New York Times*, May 15 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/15/us/philadelphia-move-bombing-cremation.html/>.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Woman, Native, Other*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Outlaw, Lucius T. *Social Ordering and the Systematic Production of Ignorance*. Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Sharpe, Christina. "And to Survive." *Small Axe* 22, no. 3 (November 2018): 171–180.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2015. ACLS Humanities E-Book.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues." *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (1994): 1–17.