

Editorial: Race/Matter - materialism and the politics of racialization

Posted By [dimitris papadopoulos](#) and [sanjay sharma](#) on 23 Feb 2008 @ 8:38 pm in [2-Race/Matter \[Feb 08\]](#), [Issues](#) | [No Comments](#)

A materialist turn in the humanities and social sciences has revitalized work in feminism, science and technology studies, critical social theory and phenomenology. Nonetheless, we want to ask what's at stake when 'race' is grasped from a materialist standpoint? Is the focus on materiality able to track and unravel the manifold neo-racisms of contemporary globalization? Does it supersede the limitations of social constructionist accounts of race? And could a materialist ontology of race transform and invigorate anti-racist praxis?

This second journal issue of darkmatter explores materialist theorizations from a range of perspectives engaged with the lived realities of the persistence of race. Racialized power is increasingly deterritorialized, and the transgression of extant borders is constitutive for their reproduction. Power is not simply a function of the symbolic, but is an operation of the 'real'. In other words, interrogating the materiality of race is underwritten by how race inhabits the real – its actual conditions of mutation-emergence-proliferation.

How many times have we repeated the mantra of race as a social (and discursive) construct and still be left with a feeling that it fails to tell the whole story. So called 'post-race' discourses are found to be wanting for their potential to erase why race matters. The point is not to privilege the real over symbolic determinations (representation) vis-à-vis invoking a new found neo-materialist ontology of indeterminacy.¹ Nevertheless, our intention is to consider what happens when we move away from constructionist approaches of race predicated on the pursuit of anti-essentialism or on the forgetting of the materiality of signification.² How can we understand the materiality of race in a non-foundationalist, non-determinist, non-reductionist way?

Undeniably, constructionist approaches focusing on the discursive production of race have been crucial for analysing racism, even if a politics of representation and the pedagogy of changing the conditions of representation ostensibly have become an anti-racist orthodoxy. Yet, are these practices wholly effective for challenging the persistence race and incarnations of differential racisms in new realities emerging from the neo-liberal transformations of capitalist production, the implosion of borders (geographic, symbolic, psychic), new media virtualities and the reproduction of life through bio-tech/genomics. While the association of phenotypical differences with cultural categories is a socially and historically contingent process, we continue to be confronted by the irreducibility of race. From the perspective of materiality embodied difference is not the end point which has to be discursively negotiated or dissolved. Rather, difference is an actual point of departure and struggle, in order to contest the constitution of race on the very ground of everyday life. What's at stake here is not so much how race is produced but how we confront racism in its multifarious materialities. In this special issue, the opening article by James Arvanitakis and Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel raise this in their conversation on the predicaments and possibilities of anti-racist politics today.

Thus, the aim is to move away from this 'hyper-productionism', in Donna Haraway's words,³ towards a more involved and thicker grasp of race. This can strengthen anti-racism as a political praxis which has as its starting point the material embodied experiences of people and as its target the change of the everyday material conditions of existence. This is the topic of a first set of contributions to the special issue which try to come to terms with the making of race in everyday relations and to explore how race is un/done through the continuous re/formations of space and place. While Arun Saldanha and Daniel Swanton focus on the geographies of racism, whiteness and the arrangements of bodies in the Goan village Anjuna and in the British community of Keighley, Zanny Begg interrogates the making of racism through the gentrification of Sydney's Redfern area which has traditionally been home to migrant and Aboriginal communities.

The anchoring of race in space corresponds directly with its materialisation in the human body. In this

context both, issues of embodiment as well as the problem of the biologization of race are crucial for understanding the problem of materiality. We know that race is a culturally contingent category and not a biological given, simply because, as Steven Rose argues, genetic differences between populations do not correspond with the social formation of 'racial' divisions.⁴ Questioning the biological reductionism of race gives rise to post-race fantasies and the possibility of 'race overcoming' as Paul Gilroy puts it.⁵ While this position seems to be important for a vision which points beyond the tyranny of race it can neglect that racial exclusion is sustained not because it has a biological existence, but because it is literally made to have one (consider genetic screening, new databases which classify populations, genetic kinship and ancestry etc). What we are interested in here is how 'matter comes to matter',⁶ that is, how the social and material aspects of race are inextricably conjoined to create the actual worlds in which people live. Fanon said that racism enters the colonized through the skin.⁷ This is epidermalization. Forty years later racism enters the colonized through paths which lie beneath the skin, a deep epidermalization or deep essentialism — the double of genetic purity through ancestry on the one hand and social mixture through migrational movements in population genomics on the other maintain the persistence of these new forms of epidermalization, (e.g. in the Human Genome Diversity Project, the Genographic project, or the conjuncture of behavioural and molecular genetics).

The social reality of race emerges through a dangerous 'ontological choreography'⁸ which includes many different actors and many different levels of social organisation, as Jenny Reardon shows in her piece in this journal issue. How can we contest this material incarnations of race? The journal issue attempts to make a case that these developments cannot (only) be contested by proclaiming that the category of race is merely produced through genomics. The questions of biological essentialism is much more complicated and has various social and political consequences some of which are debated in Ben Pitcher's article. Rather we could say that racism needs to be contested on the level where communities shift the new (biologized) meanings of race and un/do them through their everyday practices which change the conditions of their material existence; race is an embodied phenomenon which is felt, lived, re/made through multiple habitual ways in our everyday lives. Damien Riggs and Debbie Epstein & Robert Morrell in their contributions discuss how race is both manifested and made contestable on this level of the everyday.

This is also the topic of Marianne Pieper, Vassilis Tsianos & Efthimia Panagiotidis' paper on the embodied experiences of precarious migrant workers in post-Fordist conditions. Among the main reasons which many believe that facilitated the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism is the exodus of certain parts of the working class from industrialism to a new form of capital production which incorporates all of social relations, affect, and subjectivity of workers.⁹ Despite its fruitfulness for a materialist analysis of the conditions of production in contemporary capitalism this story seems to be one-sided because it refers only to specific parts of the working classes in North-Atlantic societies. There are at least two neglected dimensions to this story which both refer to the persistence and materiality of race. Firstly, when the 1970s and 80s exodus from the factory was taking place, there was another form of social struggle unfolding, this of migrants and racialized groups: spontaneous autonomous migrant resistance and black wildcat strikes in the factories of Europe and the USA. These social conflicts and struggles never found their expression in the hyper-productionist tale of Post-Fordism and cognitive capitalism which was mainly an affair of the white working classes as they attempted to reposition themselves in the new conditions of employment. Migration and race remained outside of the traditional 'materialist' history of class struggle. But they were not erased, they materialised in memory and affects of the 'great deterritorialized', that is the movements of the migrant proletariat which Angela Melitopoulos evokes in her video clip extract from her film 'Passing Drama'.

The second neglected dimension of the hyper-productionist story of post-Fordism is the issue of dirty work: migrant, female and de-skilled labour. The exodus from industrialism to post-Fordism corresponds with a class recomposition that is immanently sustained by allocating dirty work to particular social groups through direct processes of racialization and sexism as Anna Curcio and Pieper et al explore in their papers. Thinking of the materiality of race as part of this story force us to challenge the ubiquitous reductionism in traditional 'materialist' politics of the left which understands social relations as ultimately formed by the antagonism between capital and labour. One of the effects of this is, as Angela Mitropoulos argues in her contribution, the crisis of multiculturalism and the insertion of new tactics of differential inclusion and decrees of superfluity organised through reconfigurations of racism around simultaneously intimate and contractarian norms.

The articles in this special issue turn our attention to the materiality of race for rethinking the

transformations of labour, migration, space and embodiment from a perspective committed to changing and strengthening the praxis of anti-racism today.

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Notes

1. Brian Massumi (2002) *Parables for the Virtual*, London: Duke, while stressing the 'ontological priority' of movement and indeterminacy, does not simply characterize signification as some kind of second-order process or effect. [[↩](#)]
2. Kobena Mercer (1994) *Welcome to the Jungle*, London: Routledge, draws upon Bakhtin/Voloshinov for maintaining that the sign 'Black' needs to be grasped in 'materialist' terms. [[↩](#)]
3. Haraway, D. J. (1992). The promises of monsters: A regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson & P. A. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (pp. 295-337). London: Routledge, p.300 [[↩](#)]
4. 'Modern genetic evidence demonstrates that whilst there are average genetic differences between human populations, these do not map on the socially ascribed 'racial' divisions. ... In fact the overwhelming proportion of the genetic difference between individuals lies within rather than between so-called races – leading most modern biologists to discard as unhelpful the term 'race' in the human context.' p.95 in Rose, S. (2006) *The 21st century brain. Explaining, mending and manipulating the mind*. London: Vintage. [[↩](#)]
5. 'Genomics may send out the signal to reify "race" as code and information, but there is a sense in which it also points unintentionally toward 'race's' overcoming. This cannot be a single, bold act of creativity, a triumphant, once-and-for-all negation. It must be more like a gradual withering away arising from growing irrelevancy. At the smaller than microscope scales that open up the body for scrutiny today, 'race' becomes less meaningful, compelling, or salient to the basic tasks of healing and protecting ourselves." p.37 in Gilroy, P. (2000) *Against race. Imagining political culture beyond the color line*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press. [[↩](#)]
6. Barad, K. (2003) Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801-831. [[↩](#)]
7. Fanon, F. (1967) *Black skin, white masks*. New York: Grove Press. [[↩](#)]
8. See Thompson, C. (2005) *Making parents. The ontological choreography of reproductive technologies*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. [[↩](#)]
9. See for example Dyer-Witheford, N. (2001). Empire, immaterial labour, the new combination, and the global worker. *Rethinking Marxism. A Journal of economics, culture, and society*, 13 (3-4), 70-81. [[↩](#)]

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