

Reflections

Racialized immigrants becoming part of the city: connecting migration, space and race – commentary to van Liempt

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Building on Ilse van Liempt's (2023) lecture, this commentary addresses the connection and shift between forced displacement and local emplacement by addressing what becoming part of the city means for racialized immigrants. By bringing forward the notion of racialization I hope to contribute to a growing body of literature discussing how malleable and productive the concept of race – albeit erased and relegated to the past – keeps on shaping conversations about and across Europe. Connecting migration, space and race offers a particularly rich context in which to have this discussion because, as all three elements are mutually constructive, addressing them together exposes some of the complexities and nuances of the experience of becoming part of the city for racialized immigrants.

Addressing this topic calls into question my own experience as an immigrant which, as a French white woman living in Finland and working at the University, is shaped by many privileges. It is therefore important to highlight the position of power from which I talk, in part because of the extent to which whiteness permeates much of our conceptual and methodological work as researchers. However, committed we, as individuals, might be to anti-racism, it is important to recognize that we are working within the structures of academia and as such are working within a (discursive) space that has historically been organized through whiteness. Exposing the racial structures at play in Academia is a small but critical step to contest it and work towards change within the academy as well as society.

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Immigrants in Europe: covert racialization and the erasure of race

As Goldberg (2015, 107) reminds us, “every racism is relationally structured”. Connecting race and immigration therefore automatically invites us to look at the structures and relations through which racialization processes take place. Thus, our focus cannot reduce race to immigrants and immigration, but need to address the role played by receiving societies and hosts in (re)producing racialized as well

as hegemonic a-racial positions. This aspect is key in the European context since the term ‘immigrant’ is a covertly racialized category, and the term ‘European’ covertly signifies whiteness. Literature has shown how Europeanness is shaped by and shaping whiteness without explicit mentions of a racial order or a white supremacy hierarchy (Beaman 2019). Referring to the invisibilization of discourses of whiteness in Europe, Essed and Trienekens (2008, 69) talk of a “floating concept”. They argue that “European-ness probably means ‘white’ (whichever way white gets to be defined), ‘plus’ something else. This plus refers to a continuum between popular (everyday practice) and high culture.” (*ibid.*). What the authors describe are the multifaceted and covert ways in which the category ‘European’ is constructed as inaccessible for many.

Such inaccessibility is due, in part, to the erasure of race in Europe that points to two intertwined aspects: the pervasiveness of whiteness, and the use of other social dimensions to position racialized individuals while refusing “to acknowledge the structures of race ordering the social” (Goldberg 2015, 93). As individuals are taught not to think through race, they are instead encouraged to think in terms of ethnicity, culture, nationality, religion and so on (Morning 2009). The category ‘immigrant’ illustrates the discursive shift from race to culture. As a result, racial hierarchy is maintained and racism enacted without mentioning race but instead focusing on ethnicity and culture – a well-known and powerful discursive strategy to depoliticize and individualize the discriminations people face (Tittle 2004; Bonilla-Silva 2021). The erasure of race is intertwined with neoliberal ideologies that contribute to dismiss racism altogether by pointing the fingers at individual incidents rather than structural inequalities, and overlooking the way racism is not only about losses but also about gains – as MacIntosh powerfully reminds us “As a White person [...] I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth” (MacIntosh as cited in hooks 2009, 74).

Going to a new place means going through many emotional, spatial and institutional adjustments. When talking about her move from Kentucky, the place where she grew up, to California where she went to study, hooks (2009, 12) talks about these adjustments, including that of learning to identify new forms of racism: “Away from my native place I learned to recognize the myriad faces of racism, racial prejudice and hatred, the shape shifting nature of white supremacy”. This resonates with the experiences of racialized immigrants in Europe who are faced with the challenges of identifying how race and racism play out in that specific post-racial space. Contrary to how the term post-racial is sometimes used in public discourses, it does not mean that race belongs to the past or that it is only relevant elsewhere (usually thinking of the United States) (Salem & Thompson 2016). Rather, a post-racial reality means that there are new ways of thinking, talking, and ordering racial and racist expressions (Goldberg 2015), and in Europe such new ways typically rely on proxies. For racialized immigrants to put a name on what they experience and perceive can therefore be particularly difficult and alienating as processes connected to race are constantly concealed and denied (Lentin 2008). Connecting race and migration studies is therefore central to apprehend the various ways in which racialization processes permeate immigrants’ experiences in connection to the power dynamics at play in host societies. Thus, a call for the racialization of immigration studies (e.g. Sáenz & Manges Douglas 2015) starts from the premise that race is woven into the fabric of society and mediates life experiences – of immigrants as well as hosts – in connection with social class, gender and other social dimensions. Categories used to describe privileged mobilities such as ‘expatriates’, ‘digital nomads’ or ‘global citizens’ remind us of the covert racialization that permeate all subject positions, some as invisible and privileged, and others as minoritized and marginalized.

Interdisciplinary and local focus: developing new tools

Notwithstanding similarities among discourses of race circulating in Europe, local idiosyncratic discourses exist. Part of the work that awaits us as we conceptualize race in connection to immigration in Europe is to identify similarities and differences through which race is (covertly) deployed across European countries. For instance, in the Netherlands, where van Liempt’s (2023) work was conducted, discourses of race align with the colorblind and universalist framework that circulates in many European countries (Lentin 2008), but are supplemented by local discourses of tolerance and openness towards

differences that further contributes to disconnect Dutchness from racism (Essed & Hoving 2014; Çankaya & Mepschen 2019). In contrast, discourses of race in Finland are articulated around specific strategies of erasure connected to discourses of victimization and Nordic exceptionalism (Hoegaerts *et al.* 2022) while, in turn, discourses of race in France are connected to deep-seated national ideologies of secularism, universalism and republic (Sommier 2020). Despite the variety and complexities of racial formations in Europe, these are often discussed through examples and scholarship from the United States (US), whether it is to argue race has no place in Europe today or to address European racial realities through US lenses. Developing conceptual tools that depart from US-centric frameworks and speak to the specificities of European racial realities is therefore essential.

Increasing scholarship is produced on race, racism and racialization processes specific to the European contexts (e.g. Goldberg 2006; Wekker 2016; Boulila 2019) but tends to remain within the boundaries of a few academic disciplines, such as Race and Ethnic studies or Cultural Studies, rather than being incorporated across fields of study. And yet, since race permeates and organizes society as a whole, exploring racial structures and imaginaries should permeate all disciplines to gain deeper understandings of racial realities as well as the contexts they shape. As such, focusing on space has proven useful to apprehend the malleability, volatility, relational and contextual dimensions of race. Key concepts such as ‘white space’ (Anderson 2015), ‘racial landscapes’ (James *et al.* 2016), ‘periphrastic space’ (Goldberg 1993) or ‘critical spatial literacy’ (Amoo-Adare 2011) all shed light on the way social realities take shape through the intersection of race and space. Scholars have repeatedly shown how social geography can benefit from and to the study of race since spatial and racial boundaries are mutually constitutive (Neely & Samura 2011). Such a multilayered focus also helps capture the complexities of lived realities and, echoing van Liempt’s (2023) plea, contributes to move away from dichotomous and reductive approaches to migration.

Although work on race and space is often from and about the United States, this approach is particularly relevant in Europe as a means of capturing the concealed omnipresence of race. As Goldberg (2006, 340) argues, Europe’s slavery and colonial past is embedded in “the archite(x)ture of European space”. Yet, this past and its contemporary ramifications, for instance in connection to issues of belonging, are buried. Thus, connecting race, space and immigration offers opportunities to make the invisible visible and to question “[d]ominant discourses [which] *miss* historical explanations and *dismiss* the connection between present ethnic humiliations and the brutality of colonization, slavery, and antisemitism” (Essed & Hoving 2014, 7). The connection between space and race illustrates how explicitly bringing in race as an object of research can help scholars capture nuances, complexities, contradictions, dialectic relationships between past and present, local and transnational, individual and structural, as well as bridge gaps between disciplines to sharpen conceptual and methodological tools. This commentary therefore ends on such a call for researchers across fields of study to recognize and apprehend race as a recurrent structuring element of European realities that requires us to turn towards transdisciplinary and multi-layered approaches.

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