

Critical Geographies Of Race

Winter 2021

Graduate Reading Group
Department of Geography
McGill University

Final Report

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Background

During the Winter 2021 term, thirteen graduate students at the Department of Geography, McGill University, organized and participated in an informal reading group to explore topics related to race, racism, and racialization from a critical geographies perspective. This initiative was the outcome of a lack in graduate level courses exploring race, social issues, oppression, and resistance offered by the Department of Geography, and from a growing demand for such courses from graduate students who are increasingly aware of the need, importance, and urgency of exploring such themes. The Geography Graduate Society Equity Working Group responded to this by launching the 'Racial Geographies sub-committee'. This reading group is the outcome of this sub-committee's work. For a timeline of this project, please see Appendix 1.

Format

Members of this reading group met on a bi-weekly basis, on Thursdays from 10am to noon. In total, reading group members met over 16 contact hours. Each session was organized based on the preferences of the 'session lead'. This person was in charge of selecting the readings (2-5 articles or book chapters), introducing the session topic, and facilitating session engagements. Sometimes the session lead relied on audiovisual material, sometimes not.

Participants

In total, 13 graduate students (3 PhD; 10 Master) at the Department of Geography, McGill University, participated in the Critical Geographies of Race reading group. According to our post-reading group survey (N=8; 61.5% total participants), 71.4% of participants were human geographers and 28.6% worked within thematic areas of physical geography. Our survey shows that 75% of respondents participated in at least half of the sessions, with 50% attending between 6-7 sessions. When asked for the main reason for not attending all eight sessions, 57.1% identified "scheduling conflicts" and 42.9% indicated "needed to do other work." For participant testimonials collected through a post-reading group survey, see Appendix 2.

Syllabus

Critical Geographies of Race

[READING GROUP / WINTER 2021]

Scholarship emerging in the epistemological paradigm shifts of postmodernism, postcolonialism, and the 'cultural turn' have brought about important critical perspectives on race and space. Human geography has played a central role in these developments, and particularly so in its reflections on the spatial dimensions of race, racism, and racialization. Through its exploration of critical race, postcolonial/decolonial, Indigenous, Black, feminist, diasporic/migrant, and queer theories, this reading group aims to critically explore the spatial dimensions of race. Specifically, the **Critical Geographies of Race** reading group explores how space-as-process participates in inclusion and exclusion, containment and mobility, access and denial, and oppression and liberation. Readings are drawn from a wide range of fields, including human geography, anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology. While global examples are explored, an important focus is allocated to the discussion of colonial legacies and racialized injustice in Canada.

Introduction to Racial Geographies

- Lead: Jennifer Langill
- Readings
 - ◊ Inwood, Joshua F. and Yarbrough, Robert A. 2010. "Racialized places, racialized bodies: The impact of racialization on individual and place identities," *GeoJournal* 75: 299-301.
 - ◊ Kobashi, Audrey and Peake, Linda. 2000. "Racism out of place: Thoughts on whiteness and antiracist geography in the new millennium," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 90, no. 2: 392-403.
 - ◊ McIntosh, Peggy. 1989. "White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack," *Peace and Freedom Magazine* (July/August): 10-12.

Black Women Geographies

- Lead: Patrice Matthews
- Readings
 - ◊ Daley, Patricia. 2020. "Lives lived differently: Geography and the study of black women," *Area* 52, no. 4: 794-800.
 - ◊ McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The Role of Geography in Systems of Racism and Oppression

- Lead: Emma Avery
- Readings
 - ◊ Naylor, Lindsay, Daigle, Michelle, Zaragocin, Sofia, Ramírez, Margaret Marietta and Gilmartin, Mary. 2018. "Interventions: Bringing the decolonial to political geography," *Political Geography* 66: 199-209.
 - ◊ Noxolo, Patricia. 2017. "Decolonial theory in a time of the re-colonisation of UK," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 42, no. 3: 342-344.
 - ◊ Hampton, Rosalind. 2020. "Trying to keep Canada white and the power to write history." In *Black Racialization and Resistance at an Elite University*, 54-74. Toronto: Toronto University Press.

Session 4

Abolition Geography

- Lead: Jugal Patel
- Readings
 - ◇ Benjamin, Ruha. 2016. "Catching our breath: Critical race STS and the carceral imagination," *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 2 (June): 145-156.
 - ◇ Davis, Angela. Y. 2016. *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
 - ◇ Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi. 1997. "The color of reason: The idea of 'race' in Kant's Anthropology." In *Postcolonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*, edited by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, 103-131. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
 - ◇ Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
 - ◇ Kelley, Robin D. G. 2021. "Why Black Marxism, why now?," *Boston Review*, 1 February.

Session 5

Racializing Migrants and Spaces of Control

- Lead: Nicolas Parent
- Readings
 - ◇ McDowll, Meghan G. and Wonders, Nancy A. 2010. "Keeping migrants in their place: Technologies of control and racialized public space in Arizona," *Social Justice* 36, no. 2: 54-72.
 - ◇ Ehrkamp, Patricia. 2019. "Geographies of migration II: The racial-spatial politics of immigration," *Progress in Human Geography* 43, no. 2: 363-375.

Session 6

Racialized Urban Landscapes

- Lead: Camila Florez
- Readings
 - ◇ Alves, Jaime Amparo .2018. *The Anti-Black City: Police Terror and Black Urban Life in Brazil*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
 - ◇ McClintock, Nathan. 2018. "Urban agriculture, racial capitalism, and resistance in the settler-colonial city," *Geography Compass* 12, no. 6: 1-16.

Gender and Race

- Lead: Kara Martin
- Readings
 - ◊ Bonds, Anne. 2019. "Race and ethnicity II: White women and the possessive geographies of white supremacy." *Progress in Human Geography* 44, no. 4: 778-788.
 - ◊ Cerezo, Alison, Cummings, Mariah, Holmes, Meredith and Williams, Chelsey. 2019. "Identity as resistance: Identity formation at the intersection of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 44, no. 1: 67-83.
 - ◊ Moon, Dreama G. and Holling, Michelle A. 2020. "'White supremacy in heels': (White) feminism, white supremacy, and discursive violence." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2: 253-260.
 - ◊ Stasiullius, Daiva and Jhappan, Radha. 1995. "The Fractious Politics of a Settler Society: Canada." In *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*, edited by Daiva Stasiullius and Nira Yuval-Davis. London: SAGE Publications.

Race and Housing

- Lead: Gillian Rowan
- Readings
 - ◊ Brown, Dorothy A. 2021. "Your home's value is based on racism," *The New York Times*, 20 March.
 - ◊ Courtney, Marian. 1985. "Mt. Laurel housing issue finally resolved," *The New York Times*, 4 August.
 - ◊ Jan, Tracy and Hernandez, Arelis R. 2020. "Segregated from opportunity: Nearly three decades after George Floy's first left Cuney Homes, another generation tries to make it out of Houston's oldest housing project," *Washington Post*, 15 October.
 - ◊ Long, Alecia P. 2007. "Poverty is the new prostitution: Race, poverty, and public housing in post-Katrina New Orleans." *The Journal of American History* 94: 795-803.
 - ◊ New York Times Editorial Board. 2021. "You've heard about gerrymandering. What happens when it involves prisons?" *The New York Times*, 11 April.

Postmortem

In the post-reading group survey, we asked reading group participants to share their perspectives on aspects of the course that worked well and those that should be refined or restructured. Here, we summarize the feedback provided.

Strengths

Several participants identified the student-driven nature of the reading group as one of its primary strengths. Since each student selected a topic to discuss for a given week, many themes were explored throughout the eight-week period, as evidenced in the previously outlined syllabus. Participants expressed particular appreciation for the weeks where the student presenter prepared a visual presentation and/or discussion questions on their respective topic. Links to previously explored topics were also valued. Finally, participants praised the reading group's commitment to fostering a safe, cooperative, and welcoming space in which they felt comfortable asking questions and discussing sensitive topics.

Shortcomings

Respondents to the post-reading group survey largely agreed that the course could improve in terms of organization, structure, and consistency. Within the informal setting of this group, establishing a common approach proved difficult. For instance, while most participants agreed that visual presentations and discussion questions were effective means to facilitating conversation, not all session leads took this route. One participant posited that having a professor moderate this group could help ensure that conversations remain sharp and on topic.

Because participation in the reading group consisted of an informal commitment, attendance often varied from week to week, with numbers generally ranging between five to eight students. Participants cited this as another cause of inconsistency that disrupted the fluidity of discussion from one week to the next.

Returning to the reading course description, some participants remarked that we did not fully realize this mandate. Specifically, participants pointed out that although we critically examined some systems of oppression, we rarely critically examined our own role as researchers and graduate students operating within such systems. In addition, the reading group did not engage in many discussions about forms of resistance within marginalized communities, and more broadly, social movements that aim to abolish institutions of oppression.

Next Steps

Reflecting on survey results and informal conversations with graduate students who participated in this reading group, we propose the following Next Steps. Our group agrees that a formal Critical Geographies of Race course is necessary at the Department of Geography, McGill University.

Formal Course

This reading group responded to a gap in structured teaching and learning on issues of race, racialization, and racism from a geographic perspective. Reflecting on participants' feedback, we propose that a formal course be established at the Department of Geography. Based on the feedback provided, we suggest this new course also take a seminar-style and student-led approach. Here, the appointed professor would act primarily as a moderator and guide, actively overseeing the discussion and developing clearer guidelines, expectations, and deliverables for the course. While we believe that the format whereby students selected the course topics allowed for a student-centred learning experience tailored to specific interests, a professor leading this course could help shore up the gap between topical issues, critical theory, and broader geographic epistemologies.

Providing a formal course of this nature would produce connected benefits. First, it would demonstrate that the Department is working towards making a firm commitment to the issues of race, racialization, and racism. Second, it would facilitate the invitation of experts to speak about their experiences, research, and work around these topics.

'Black Urban Geography' Hiring Line

We envision that this course be established as part of the 'Black Urban Geography' hiring line that is forthcoming at the Department of Geography, McGill University. While graduate students know very little about this new position, they are excited by its prospects and glad to see the Department took advantage of McGill's new EDI initiative to support the forging of these new positions across the university. That said, graduate students who participated in this reading group feel that they should be included in how this new position takes shape. This final report is a testament to our commitment to seriously engage with the topics of race, racism, and racialization. We urge the Department to embrace the momentum created through this reading group and draw upon it through a consultation process.

Other Topics

Below is a list of other topics that could be explored within a formal reading course, as expressed by participants in the post-survey:

Indigenous geographies; Decolonial geographies; Traditional ecological knowledge in research; Environmental racism; Education and race; Research ethics when working with marginalized and racialized persons and groups; Technology and race; Cultural appropriation and resistance; Nonbinary and trans identities in gendered and racialized spaces; Mixed race identities; Religion-race nexus and political power; Case studies from the Global South

APPENDIX 1

PROJECT TIMELINE

2020 - Planning

- October Racial Geographies sub-committee founded
1st meeting
- November Meeting with Prof. Benjamin Forest (possible GEOG 625)
Call for participant interest
- December 1st meeting with interested persons
Availabilities poll sent out to participants

2021 - Reading Group

- January 1st reading group session
- May Last reading group session
Post-reading group survey sent to participants
- June Survey data analysis
- July Final report published

Future & Hope

- Summer 2021 Report sharing and follow up with Department
- Fall 2021 Planning of new Critical Geographies of Race course
- Winter 2022 Credit-based course begins

APPENDIX 2

PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIALS

“There are currently no classes at McGill Geography, at graduate OR undergraduate level, that focuses on geographies of race and racism and critical race theory. If such a course had existed when I completed my course work I would have definitely taken it. Instead, I was forced to take courses in numerous other departments because there was nothing relevant to my research within the Geography Department. This is a huge gap in the program and means that students who graduate from the department are inadequately prepared and educated on a dimension relevant to all areas of geographic research. McGill Geography cannot claim to be one of the leading departments in Canada without offering such a course. While graduate students have tried to fill this gap through this reading group, it is essential that graduate and undergraduate students have access to an institutionalized course on geographies of race using critical race theory.”

- Participant, CGR reading group

“Unfortunately, I wasn't able to attend the early sessions because of research obligations, so I can only provide my brief glimpse into the group. From my perspective, the Critical Geographies of Race reading group provided the kind of learning I was expecting and craving from my studies at McGill. As a graduate student, I expect to be challenged with difficult subjects and pushed to question my own beliefs. The CGR reading group provided the opportunity to explore complex topics and learn from each other's knowledge and experience. I think this is exactly what the Geography Department is missing!”

- Participant, CGR reading group

“I really enjoyed participating in this reading group. Everyone who participated was open and transparent about their bias, and a shared ethics of care created a safe space where we could speak with curiosity and without judgement. The readings were carefully selected and informative, and I got the sense that most of us were really invested in this group and its aims. To think over a dozen of us self-organized to set this up shows how much we value learning about the topics explored in this reading group. This reading group showed me how badly we need a course on this at the Department of Geography; While we explored many different topics around racial geographies, it was clear that we didn't share a common way of talking about these issues and I think this is an important way forward given the scale of racism and racialization across human societies.”

- Participant, CGR reading group

APPENDIX 2

PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIALS (continued)

“It is essential that the Department open up opportunities for learning about racial geographies. Critical Geographies of Race should be a foundational and required courses for undergraduate and graduate students, with options for group-directed readings. Our department needs to be accountable to the white supremacy that enables McGill and the success of most of the professors in our department, offering students the chance to learn the roots and impacts of these systems, learn from their own experiences and the experiences of their peers, and learn critical geographies of race that help students to identify the inequalities we are living in and contributing to, as well as discuss alternative futures in the Department and society at large.”

- Participant, CGR reading group

“I really enjoyed this reading group! I learned so much from the readings, my peers, and our discussions. I went into this experience without much background on critical race theory and critical geography. I was initially really worried that I didn’t have the language, background, and knowledge to contribute meaningfully to the discussions, and I definitely struggled with some of the readings since they went in-depth on concepts and terms that I was only just being introduced to. However, at no point did I feel like I didn’t belong in the group. On the contrary, from the very start, the established objective was made very clear: to learn and grow together. The course has helped me become a sharper geographer, and I feel more confident in my understanding of and ability to articulate the ways in which the marginalization of BIPOC and other marginalized communities is built into the arrangement and structure of physical spaces, from neighborhoods to prisons, and the institutions with power over these spaces such as the criminal justice system and housing authorities. I knew all of this on a relatively superficial level prior to the reading course, but after having taken the course, I now have a more profound understanding of the connections to geography and how the discipline provides us a lens to analyze race and space. On a more personal level, the course has simply made me a better informed person and has provided me with a clear perspective that I have been using to try to be a better ally and a better person overall. If we continue the reading group next fall, I will definitely participate and hope to learn about the tools, mechanisms, and strategies of resistance that we can use to combat the oppression of BIPOC communities and other marginalized peoples.”

- Participant, CGR reading group

Credits

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