

A History of the Present: What Thinking Spatially Can Tell Us
about Race and Education

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Symposium on Diversity and Inclusion
April 15, 2016

In 2009, I was a 7th Grade Language Arts teacher in Prince George's County, Maryland. As we read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, a book set in 1930's Mississippi, my seventh graders and I began to have a conversation about literary conventions that developed into a discussion about race, inequality, and schooling. In the first scene, the main character, and her two brothers are walking to school in the rain. Slogging toward their segregated black school, the bus from the white school nearly runs them off the road. Why, one of the characters asks. "'Cause they like to see us run and it ain't our bus," the oldest of the siblings responds. Trying to get my students to engage in comparative thinking, I began by asking how was this scene from 1930's Mississippi different to and similar from their own lives. Several students, for whom the election of president Obama was their first political memory, told me "We're not like that now, racism doesn't exist" or a variation of that. One student, quiet for a moment, paused and turned to his seat mate: "Look at this place, fool," he said, "It's still segregated."

I came to Rutgers because I was interested in the "why" of my student's lives. Why is Prince George's County, located just outside of Washington, D.C., one of the largest school districts in the nation and the wealthiest predominantly African American county in the United States, segregated and under-resourced, and why is it talked about in particular ways? I set out to do an ethnographic project looking at the effects of school improvement policies on students of color. But an independent study took me to the archives and I became less interested in why and more interested in how. Shifting from why to how and starting at my experiences as a teacher looking back into the past brought me toward a fascination with what Foucault has called a "history of the present." My dissertation is a history of school desegregation in suburban Maryland between 1950 and 1980. I use social scientific notions of space from human geography and theories of racial formation to highlight the processes through which meaningful racial and

spatial divisions came to be naturalized over time in ways that continue to shape contemporary educational opportunity and access.

What is a history of the present? What is genealogy? What does it help us understand?

Human geography tells us that educational and residential spaces themselves are imbued with and productive of social meaning.¹ Controlling the meaning and experience of space is essential to how power works, due to the fact that hegemony—political and ideological—is reliant on controlling representations and their materializations (e.g. built environment).² Given the relationship between social control and space, understanding how spaces have come to be, and the attendant social processes that maintain them and naturalize them, requires that we engage in the genealogical work of considering how discourses are materialized in spaces within larger flows of power and knowledge that themselves come to develop at different historical moments.³

Fairmont Heights, 2015

I want to provide an example of what happens when we think spatially and when we approach spaces genealogically. How does thinking about journalistic and online representations

¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (New York: Blackwell, 1990); Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*. (D. Nicholson-Smith, trans.). (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)

² Lefebvre, *Production of Space*: 227; Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*

³ Jeremy Crampton “Foucault and Space, Territory, Power.” In Falzon, C., O’Leary, T., Sawicki, J. (eds.), *A Companion to Foucault*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012): 367; Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Sheridan Smith, A.M. (trans). (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

of the space and the discourses employed help us to differently understand the relationship between race, space, and education?

In April of 2015 a fight broke out at Fairmont Heights High school in Capitol Heights Maryland. Here's how Fox 5 news reported on it:

A massive fight broke out at Fairmont Heights High School in Capitol Heights Thursday afternoon and students we spoke with say this isn't the first time the **violence has gotten out of control.**

Neighbors and students for the most part did not want to speak on camera, but they did say there is a "**fight culture**" at the high school.

If we take a look at Trulia, a real estate website which allows homeowners to see reviews of area schools, map crime, look at property values, and see other amenities in prospective neighborhoods, we also see Fairmont Heights:

As a former student I can tell you that **this school is ghetto.** It does not prepare you for college at all. If at all possible don't go to fairmont heights **give your self a chance**

If we look at this schooling and residential space, we see several things. The first is that there's a "fight culture," not an isolated incident of fighting or a minority of students engaging in teenage misbehavior. The "brawl" is described in cultural terms; it has a certain pathology, consistency, and reproductive component. The school is violent and "out of control"; the space itself is transformed into an ungovernable expanse where even adults can't rein in the black and brown children. In the Trulia review, we see that the school is described as "ghetto"—it is a racialized space that invokes images of poverty. In fact, being at Fairmont is an identity that adheres to people as they move forward in life, making choices and looking to the future. What the space

is—ungovernable, ghetto, violent—and who the people who go to school in the space are, become synonymous.

What if instead of taking these statements at their word, we see these statements as an accumulation of assumptions and rationales that have led us to the point where we make spatialized and racialized assumptions that stand in as natural. They then constitute part of a history of the present. What if we look back, not simply to find the origins of these statements, but rather to think about how these contemporary understandings come out of specific struggles. Garland reminds us that thinking about these layers of struggle, successive and fraught, “enables the genealogist to suggest – not by means of normative argument but instead by presenting a series of troublesome associations and lineages – that institutions and practices we value and take for granted today are actually more problematic or more “dangerous” than they otherwise appear. The point of genealogy is not to search for ‘origins.’”⁴

Fairmount Heights, 1968

Let’s go back to 1950. When Fairmount Heights High School opened in 1950 as a combined Junior-Senior high school it became one of two black high schools in the county

⁴ David Garland “What is a “history of the present”? On Foucault’s Genealogies and their Critical Preconditions” *Punishment and Society*, 16, no.4 (2014). Garland writes the genealogy is not interested in origins, but rather in lineages: “Genealogical analysis traces how contemporary practices and institutions emerged out of specific struggles, conflicts, alliances, and exercises of power, many of which are nowadays forgotten. It thereby enables the genealogist to suggest – not by means of normative argument but instead by presenting a series of troublesome associations and lineages – that institutions and practices we value and take for granted today are actually more problematic or more “dangerous” than they otherwise appear. The point of genealogy is not to search for ‘origins’” (p. 372)

whose students were bused from an area that was 486.17 square miles wide.⁵ After the 1954 Brown decision, the county was called to desegregate its black schools. But by 1968 little had changed and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) demanded that the County, come up with a revised desegregation plan. The superintendent created a plan that included closing Fairmount Heights Senior High School, and several other historically all-black schools.⁶ This proposal was yet another tactic, in a series of policy measures stretching back to the *Brown* decision, which was underpinned by assumptions of the inferiority of black educational and residential spaces—closing the black schools would count as desegregation, the county assumed.

Around the same time, due to concentrated poverty inside the Capital Beltway, the County Board of Commissioners began an application for urban renewal. The storying of Fairmount Heights and the surrounding area relied on constructing the space as abstract, as a space that passed as an absence despite its having been painstakingly produced and crafted.⁷ The application also detailed the characteristics of the people who lived within it which was elaborated as a cultural problem inherent to the space:

There is a minority group subculture often with extended family connections. Women, often supported by welfare, dominate many families. “Hanging with the gang” is more valued by teenagers than academic success, and the men, who are generally employed in

⁵ *Annual Report 1965: A Century of Public Education in Prince George's County: 1865-1965*. (Prince George's County Public Schools: Upper Marlboro):55

⁶ Carl Sims, “Negros Build Strength in Prince George's” *Washington Post*, (Washington, D.C.) Nov. 26, 1968. John Hope, ed. *Long Day's Journey into Light: Desegregation in Prince George's County*. (Washington, D.C: United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1976)

⁷ See Lefebvre, *Production of Space*: 285-6 and 289, and Wilson: 518. For Lefebvre and Wilson, abstract space is a historically produced “geographical reality” and a technique of power defined by its reductive capacity, its illusive transparency, and its use of violence.

casual unskilled tasks or unemployed, are typical of Liebow's "street corner man" and are not workable in the family. The children do not see many models of successful adults and learn from life that the poor and particularly the Negro poor, are unlikely to succeed"⁸

As the school board looked for a desegregation plan that would be palatable to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, it found in Fairmount Heights a "realized myth" which functioned as a policy "ingredient"⁹ If Fairmount Heights was blighted it was a direct result of having been systematically underfunded, but its construction as an abstract space effaced its history.¹⁰ Inferiority stood in as a common sense understanding of not just the inadequacies of the physical plant, but of the children and staff who populated the neighborhoods and classrooms. Representing Fairmount Heights as a blighted slum and the school, by extension as substandard, allowed the county to propose a desegregation policy of school closure.

Conclusion

I'm not using these quotes or examples as the sum total of my empirical case, but rather, my aim here was to briefly illustrate how race/space/education can come together and what possibilities are open to us when we change from asking why to how. My other aim was to show what genealogical thinking about space can do for how we understand contemporary issues of educational access, equity, and inclusion. For example, how does the 2015 story about Fairmont change when we peer through the layers of struggle and power that have accumulated over time?

When we think spatially we can think about how spaces are produced physically—through public policy and school reform initiatives, through court cases, and through flows of

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.37

⁹ "...ideological ingredient to social reproduction." David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (New York: Blackwell, 1990):217

¹⁰ Lefebvre: 236

capital. We can also think about what physical spaces mean to the people who live and work and go to school in them, what they symbolize to the larger neighborhood and metropolitan areas in which they are located, and how these meanings and associations get taken up in school policy often, with disastrous effects.