

Conscientious disengagement and whiteness as a condition of dialogue

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Abstract

This commentary explores some of the threads developed by the editors of *Dialogues in Human Geography* in light of the recent publication and online conversation surrounding our article, ‘Citation Matters’. We examine the precariousness of academic speech, question when it’s necessary to conscientiously *disengage* from dialogue, and posit whiteness as a limit of and condition for dialogue. We frame this around the claim, building further on Mouffe’s concept of agonism, that different speech acts, in particular within spheres like the academy, and especially in the absence of a clear foundation for dialogue, can be viewed from a point of view of nonequivalence.

Keywords

agonism, dialogue, difference, harassment, knowledge production, whiteness

In their article, ‘The Possibilities and Limits to Dialogue’, the editors of *Dialogues in Human Geography* examine themes pertaining to the conditions of academic dialogue in the context of the Trump presidency and the continuing ascendancy of far-right politics. In this response, we focus on the conditions under which dialogue can occur and under which dialogue might be legitimately *disengaged* with. We reflect on our experience as the targets of online harassment following initial publication of our article, ‘Citation Matters’ (Mott and Cockayne, 2017). We highlight the problematic focus from the media on ourselves as white scholars, despite the fact that the article in question aimed to emphasize long-standing contributions in

geography and other fields that draw attention to the consequences of citation practices privileging whiteness, cis-masculinity, and heteronormativity.

Rose-Redwood et al. (2018) draw on Mouffe’s (2000) concept of agonistics—the idea that disagreement and dissensus, rather than centrist notions of compromise—are key to democratic politics and dialogue. In one sense, the authors agree—as we do—with Mouffe’s anti-universalist position.

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In another, they are critical of agonism for tending to assume a common ground upon which dialogue is able to proceed. They ask, ‘aren’t the most profound disagreements in academia precisely over what should serve as the foundational values of scholarly discourse and practice in the first place’ (Rose-Redwood et al., 2018: 114)? To this critique, we would like to add emphasis to the problems that arise in circumstances when, as is common today, an agreed-upon foundation for dialogue is absent. We consider this especially urgent given, for example, UC Berkeley’s announcement of a (since-cancelled) ‘Free Speech Week’, in which white nationalist speakers were invited to campus to allow students to ‘hear both sides’ of the highly racialized debates in the wake of protests in Charlottesville, Virginia. When there is no shared foundation for agonistic dialogue, it is all-too-easy to annul real differences between speech acts (see for example Sultana, 2018), to conflate white supremacist speech or online harassment with academic or other attempts to engage with ideas. We claim that speech can be viewed from the point of view of nonequivalence, to situate *difference itself* as a condition for dialogue, rather than the assumed sameness that has emerged in the absence of a common foundation.

The point here is not to silence people (nor to conflate white supremacist speech with online harassment) but to note that given the absence of a shared foundation for dialogue, it is sometimes necessary to conscientiously disengage when one is faced with white supremacist interlocutors or targeted harassment. Nonequivalence may appear to be anti-egalitarian and contrary to democratic practice, and we recognize the danger in this position. Yet, as Butler (2016) notes, if one group speaks or assembles with the specific aim of silencing or preventing the speech or assembly of others (e.g. by committing or inciting acts of violence against them or by outing others as queer, trans, or paperless), their speech and assembly work against claims to democracy, and therefore, through the frame of nonequivalence, should be assessed in this context and perhaps not be considered protected forms of speech or assembly. We claim nonequivalence in order to minimize extreme and explicitly antidemocratic acts of speech and assembly, and, in the

context of this response, to highlight that harassment should not be counted as a foundation for thoughtful agonistic dialogue.

Our article, ‘Citation Matters’, highlights ongoing conversations about the racialized and gendered dynamics of knowledge production within human geography. We point to preexisting scholarship that addresses these conversations—much of which has been written by women of color (e.g. Gilmore, 2002; Joshi et al., 2015; Kobayashi, 2006; Louis, 2007; Mahtani, 2014; Nagar, 2008; Pulido, 2002; Sanders, 2006; see also the very recent article by Tolia-Kelly, 2017). We saw our contribution as a way to emphasize that conversations about the imbalanced representations of spatial knowledge have been ongoing for decades, despite the fact that the most highly cited scholars in the field are white men whose bibliographies feature other white men most prominently. As we wrote the article, we discussed our shared concern that geographers were tired of the topic of citation politics and representation. It has been addressed in geography conferences, discussed on social media, and written about as a common problem in various subdisciplines in human geography. Yet, after the publication of our article, it became clear that the idea is still novel for many geographers, for scholars in other fields, and for the general public.

Within a few weeks of the article becoming available online, we were contacted by a writer from the website *Campus Reform* who planned to publish about our article, asking us if we would respond to some questions. After reaching out to colleagues for advice, we decided to address some of the questions that we were sent. A quick search of articles previously published by this writer made it clear that they would most likely publish only the most superficial details of our article, with the specific aim of triggering *Campus Reform*’s right-wing readership. Nonetheless, we wanted to engage on some level with the hope of addressing obvious misunderstandings of our work. Despite our shared attempts to address the questions and explain the nuance specific to the context of human geography, our interlocutor, as anticipated, published a piece that severely distorted the contents of our article. Once it became public, other conservative and alt-right

websites published similar pieces, resulting in targeted harassment for both of us through social media, e-mail, and communications sent to various parties at our respective institutions. The character of these messages was often slanderous, racist, sexist, misogynist, and homophobic and included e-mails accusing us of being—somehow—both race traitors and Nazi sympathizers. Carrie bore the brunt of the harassment, which we collectively attribute primarily to her being a woman, but also to her being first and corresponding author, and being located at a US institution.

Shortly thereafter, the article was discussed in a piece published in *The Washington Post*. The attention a mainstream media outlet gave to our article led to broader popular interest across the political spectrum but also intensified the aforementioned harassment. It also brought the piece to the greater attention of geographers and other academics, who responded in various ways. Many, including some geographers, argued simply that it was bad science to pay attention to an author's identity. Others pointed to links in their own fields between citation practices and white heteromascularity. For example, Russell (2017: 8), writing in environmental education, drew on our article and other research to emphasize 'how certain voices, methodologies, and intellectual traditions continue to be marginalized' in her field. Responses and commentary on 'Citation Matters' from academics and the general public typically did not engage with our argument from the common ground that Mouffe describes—a point from which agonistic politics might be able to proceed—but from an apparently reactionary conviction that our claims (usually, we suspected, without having read them) were biased or misinformed.

Dialogue, in our reading, suggests two or more voices participating in a conversation, on equal footing with one another and with tacitly agreed upon parameters. The public responses—in particular those in the form of harassment—occurred in a manner that we generally did not consider to be dialogic and that ultimately resulted in our disengagement. As Cottom (2015) points out, academics are particularly vulnerable for calls to create public scholarship and engage outside of the proverbial ivory

tower. She writes, '[w]e're all sensitive to claims that we're out of touch and behind on neoliberal careerism. And some of us actually care about engaging publics' (Cottom, 2015: n.p.). Yet the danger is that often we do not choose the parameters for engagement. As we learned, targeted harassment and doxing of academics is an increasingly common practice. Cottom points out that one condition for dialogue is that academic institutions must be able to protect their faculty and support them through the harassment that can accompany public engagement. However, in the context of an ever-more competitive job market for early career academics, many find themselves in temporary contracts, or positions that do not offer the possibility of tenure, a situation that increases one's vulnerability and further limits the conditions for dialogue.

Based on advice we received from colleagues and our institutions, for fears over personal safety and job security, and because of the emotional exhaustion that accompanies harassment (and the necessity to read and document harassment in case legitimate threats emerge and must thus be reported to the police), we chose to disengage from further dialogue. As early career scholars without the security of tenure, we were both grateful for the support of colleagues, our departments, and our respective institutions. The public attention on our work provided a forum for *engagement*, but the opportunity for *dialogue* seemed limited. The majority of the people contacting us had obviously not read our article, and, in instances where they had, the specificity and disciplinary context of our writing was overlooked. Instead, we seemed to symbolize some aspect of the perceived liberal and elite academy that many people wanted an opportunity to attack. Some of the advice that we were given for how to deal with online harassment was to disengage from public dialogue. One should lay low on social media, not respond to online trolling or offensive e-mails, and 'wait for the storm to pass'. However, there are consequences to this approach. Friends and colleagues did not know what we were going through and were thus unable to offer support or guidance during a difficult and emotionally trying time. Out of fear of further attention and

harassment, we turned down interview offers that may have actually been legitimate opportunities for dialogue. Conscientiously disengaging, in acknowledgement of the modern limits of dialogue, was for us an unfortunate but necessary strategy for both personal safety and emotional survival.

In more general terms, disengagement is partially to blame for the fact that many academics do not realize how commonplace events like our experience actually are. We acknowledge, in consonance with Cottom's comments above, that the ability both to engage and to be able to disengage is predicated on the privilege of institutional and other resources. Thankfully, the support that was available to both of us enabled us to get through this particular encounter. Of course, such resources may not be available to all scholars, such as those employed in precarious positions, at universities with limited resources, or to scholars of color and other academics from socially marginalized backgrounds.

Throughout the 2-year period that we spent writing and editing 'Citation Matters', we frequently discussed our shared feeling that we wanted to call attention to a long-standing conversation. It was not a new idea that we were proposing, and we constantly fretted over whether it was still relevant. Hadn't others stated this before, over and over again? Why should we be the ones, as two white scholars with relative degrees of privilege, to write about this? How could we possibly say anything new about it? One of our aims was to draw attention to the wealth of already existing scholarship—most of it written by women of color—on the topic of gendered and racialized representation in our field. As a consequence of the publicity that our article received, however, the focus once again remained on two white scholars. The ideas from others that we sought to highlight were attributed to us, erasing the rich history of critique on this topic by other scholars from social marginalized backgrounds, thereby successfully whitewashing these debates. We wish to point out the primary irony, however unsurprising, of this particular encounter—that whiteness appears once again to be the condition of dialogue. In this light, it is important to draw attention, as Rose-Redwood et al. (2018)

do in their article, to how the limits of dialogue remain raced and gendered in pernicious and violent ways and to how the conditions for engagement appear to remain, still, determined by white heteromascularity.

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