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Contact Us

Open Rivers
Institute for Advanced Study
University of Minnesota
Northrop
84 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Telephone: (612) 626-5054
Fax: (612) 625-8583
E-mail: openrvrs@umn.edu
Web Site: http://openrivers.umn.edu

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TEACHING AND PRACTICE

"THE SOUL TO SEE": TOWARD A HOODOO ETHNOGRAPHY

By David Todd Lawrence

In his book, *How Racism Takes Place*, George Lipsitz (2011: 5, emphasis mine) contends that "race is produced by space," and that "it takes places for racism to take place." While Lipsitz focuses primarily on the intersection of race and space in *urban* settings, racialized spatial practices in *rural* environments can be just as devastating to communities of color, if not more so. In the case of Pinhook, a black village in southeast Missouri whose displaced residents I have worked with for almost eight years along with my colleague, Elaine Lawless, the

Ruins of Pinhook Union Baptist Church circa 2014. Like all buildings in the village, the church was completely submerged for more than two weeks. It was set ablaze by an arsonist soon after the water subsided and was later demolished along with remaining town buildings in 2015. Image courtesy of David Todd Lawrence.

devastation occurred because of an unwillingness to see followed by a callous indifference to black suffering. A village[1] of black farmers who had lived on the same piece of land for seventy years was not noticed, not consulted, and not effectively warned that the levee separating them from the dangerously swollen Mississippi River during the historic flooding of 2011 would be breached to save an historical industrial city that no longer exists.[2] The most common question people ask about Pinhook is, "how could this have happened?" We wondered the same thing when we first began working with its displaced residents, and have argued subsequently that Pinhookians were rendered invisible, erased by a society that should have seen them. What I am considering here is how could ethnography (the study and description of people and cultures)—a specifically black ethnography that resists and refuses the racist and colonialist scripts that render blackness abject—illuminate the wonderful past, present, and future of blackness in whatever spaces it occupies?

The black farmers and rural folk of Pinhook, whose ancestors arrived in the Missouri Bootheel in the early 1940s seeking to purchase land and build a community, discovered that the only land available to them was located inside the Birds Point–New Madrid Floodway—swampland designated for river overflow. It was land that nobody wanted, but they bought it anyway, cleared it, and made something good out of it. They made a home. They made a community. They made a life. Yet in an instant, that home, that community, and that life were all violently upended by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' operation of the floodway. As official narratives of the Corps and other agencies suggest, the operation of the floodway was compelled by extreme weather conditions; the Corps had no choice but to do what it did—and what it did was destroy the village of Pinhook, Missouri.[3]

Yet, as countless scholars of disaster have argued, it is all too easy to attribute such events to nature, to call them "natural disasters" and cast them as unforeseeable and unpreventable occurrences. As Anissa Janine Wardi (2011: 117) explains, disasters—and flooding in particular—bring "into relief societal inequity, racial hierarchies, resource allocation, and government policies" that manifest with disproportionate impacts on marginalized communities. Scholars focusing on race and class have written about this quite frequently with regard to Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans. Much Katrina scholarship has clearly demonstrated that the effects of disaster are not borne equally. Those effects are unequally distributed largely according to the space communities occupy. The social, economic, political, and racial dynamics of space play an undeniable role in determining who is affected and the ways in which they are affected.

In her TED Talk on black people and time, scholar Brittany Cooper (2016) explains how historically black people have been perceived as "space takers" while white people were "world makers." According to the logic of white supremacy, "space takers" occupy space they are not entitled to. They must be moved out of those spaces into less valuable, more precarious ones, and once there, their bodies and the communities they have built are erased from social, political, and historical reality. Like Lipsitz, Cooper focuses on black people in urban spaces in her analysis. Both scholars are responding to a white racial imaginary in which black people exist only in urban spaces; however many black people do live in rural spaces, and they often suffer doubly because their existence in rural spaces that have already been undervalued is made even more precarious by their erasure from spaces in which they are not understood to exist. Urbannormative practices devalue rural spaces as uninhabited "nowhere[s]" or spaces "out of which resources can be extracted" (Alexander et al 2012: 64, 66). From an urbannormative perspective, people don't exist in rural spaces—*black people especially*. As a result, the rural existence of a black village like Pinhook becomes an aberration in our spatial imaginary

that renders its inhabitants unheeded, unseen, and unprotected.

In this way, preexisting slow violence is concealed by the more legible mechanism of the natural disaster itself, which as generally understood, is not attributable to human causes. Thereby, the harms of structural racism and the violence of environmental injustice on communities of color are obscured. Consequently, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the federal government could deny any responsibility for the destruction of Pinhook; in fact, as they claim, their actions saved lives and land in almost miraculous fashion. The Corps was not the author of devastation; it was more accurately the divine hand of God.[4]

Failure to interrogate such racialized structures will lead to a future in which people of color and other marginalized communities or "space takers" will be increasingly funneled into the most precarious, dangerous, and vulnerable spaces—rural coasts, floodplains, and water insecure or environmentally hazardous areas—and then forgotten. Historically this has been the case and it continues in our present. Once devalued urban centers and coastal areas will be deliberately repossessed from under-resourced and marginalized communities pushing more people into precarious spaces, subjecting them to erasure and vulnerability to increasing environmental harms.

The recognition of a re-imagined future is necessary to prevent such erasure from continuing. We must endeavor to shift the valuation of communities and their places from economic measures to those that recognize cultural, traditional, and community significance. One way this can be fostered is through a collaborative ethnography that embraces and encourages marginalized communities to tell their own stories and to mark their rightful places in our world. Collaborative and community-based research can help enable voices and agency in marginalized communities by working to create environments where research collaborators can be empowered to take agency and wield their own voices in powerful ways.

To this end, I call for an ethnography that engages the political ramifications of place, otherness, invisibility, and precariousness. So often qualitative research in communities of color has been undertaken by white scholars within a "neutral" or "objective" framework. This so-called neutrality or objectivity, in fact, obscures and devalues the true value of communities of color and their places. Following theorists Christina Sharpe (2016: 13) and Zensele Isoke (2018), I am calling, instead, for an ethnography that participates in a reconnection with a black "past not past" as Sharpe puts it, a re-turning toward black ancestry, black traditions, and black ancestral land.

As others already have, I call for an ethnography that functions in collaboration with and recognizes the impossible yet necessary project of advocacy with the people we collaborate with; an ethnography that interrogates structures of power and oppression that impact marginalized people and communities of color disproportionately; an ethnography that embraces liberatory practices, that is radical and speaks along with the folk we collaborate with. More specifically, I, like Isoke (2018: 154), call for a distinctly black ethnography that "studies the way blackness moves, the way it speaks, the way it articulates itself—and reimagines the world to make itself belong—for a fleeting moment *in the break*." We need a Hoodoo Ethnography.

Hoodoo, an African American spiritual practice, is, as Zora Neale Hurston (1931) has explained, improvisational and flexible—it adapts, conforms, borrows from the contexts it finds itself in contact with. Rather than arriving cloaked in the power and authority of institution, Hoodoo Ethnography seeks to commune with cultural contexts and recognize their power and value. As Hurston (1931: 358) realized during her "negotiation" with Hoodoo doctor Samuel Thornton,

Zora Neale Hurston, 1938. Via the Carl Van Vechten Collection, Library of Congress.

the extraordinarily high price he quoted to share his knowledge with her was not about money at all, but rather a way of assuring that she "had the soul to see."

Hoodoo Ethnography has the willingness to see, to recognize the value of black places, black community, black history, black traditions, and black ancestors—and to imagine the possibilities of a black future. Like Hoodoo itself, which relies on a belief in the permeability of the boundaries between times, between worlds, and between ways of being, Hoodoo Ethnography requires a surrender and vulnerability to another presence that cannot be controlled or even fully understood, that may overtake us without warning. The boundaries to be crossed should be done so in a way that allows us as ethnographers to surrender power and submit to the traditions and histories that lie within ourselves and our collaborators—and in the souls of our ancestors.

A Hoodoo Ethnography cannot help but be radical and political. It refuses the imposition of judgment and opens to a radical sensibility of the other and the self. It interrogates injustice. It is open to the horrors and terrors of black existence—past and present—and it roots itself in the beautiful future realities produced by black cultural innovations and improvisations which emerge along with and in spite of haunting injustice.

Pinhook descendent Edward Lee Williams and his son enjoy fellowship during Pinhook Day Homecoming in May of 2018. Each year Pinhookians return to celebrate their community's history and traditions. In 2018 they celebrated on Pinhook land under a picnic shelter built and donated by Mennonite Disaster Services. Image courtesy of David Todd Lawrence.

I have witnessed this very emergence in my work with the still surviving community of Pinhook; I have witnessed the beauty and power of this group of people who built a home in a place nobody wanted alongside the Mississippi River. I have been astonished by the beauty of their refusal to be erased by an indifferent and powerful oppressor. Had their community been recognized and considered as valuable as the farmland and industrial capital on the other side of the Mississippi, perhaps the decision whether or not to blow the levee might have been taken differently. A Hoodoo Ethnography has the potential to understand and convey the immense value communities of color have created in their places—precarious and otherwise.

As Cooper calls for a shared temporal re-conceptualization as a way to mitigate the theft of black time, we must embrace an ethnography that contributes to a collective re-imagining of communities and their places which recognizes their value and refigures space not as a competitive racialized zero-sum competition, but as an assemblage of meaningful places wherein we can imagine and build equitable futures together. Hoodoo Ethnography has a vital role to play in making that re-imagining possible and legible.

Footnotes

[1] As an incorporated community of less than 100 people, Pinhook, Missouri was designated a village by the state of Missouri. At the time of its destruction, the population of Pinhook was somewhere between fifty and sixty residents according to resident accounts.

[2] For a more detailed description and discussion of the destruction of Pinhook, see David Todd Lawrence and Elaine J. Lawless, *When They Blew the Levee: Race, Politics, and Community in Pinhook, Missouri*, University of Mississippi Press, 2018.

[3] Official narratives and reports commissioned by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and other federal agencies generally present this conclusion.

[4] Astoundingly, the official narrative commissioned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and written by Charles Camillo detailing the Corps' actions during the historic flood of 2011 is titled *Divine Providence*.

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About the Author

David Todd Lawrence is Associate Professor of English at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Mn, where he teaches African-American literature and culture, folklore studies, and cultural studies. His research and teaching areas include James Baldwin, racial passing and ambiguity, African-American genre fiction, speculative black writing, folklore studies, and ethnographic writing. His book, *When They Blew the Levee: Race, Politics and Community in Pinhook, Mo* (2018), co-authored with Elaine Lawless, is an ethnographic project done in collaboration with residents of Pinhook, Missouri, an African American town destroyed when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers intentionally breached the Birds Point-New Madrid levee during the Mississippi River Flood of 2011.