

Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies

A vast literary whiteness and becoming undisciplined: A review of *Redlining Culture*

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So, R.J. (2021). *Redlining culture: A data history of racial inequality and postwar fiction*. Columbia University Press.

Abstract:

This review examines Ricard So's book "Redlining Culture," which explores the nexus of race, culture, and literature in postwar America. So challenges the dominant narrative of multiculturalism in postwar American literature, arguing that it masks underlying racial inequalities within the publishing industry. Using the metaphor of redlining, borrowed from housing discrimination practices, the book illustrates how structural constraints shape the production and reception of literature by minority authors. While recognizing the potential risks of big data analysis, the review emphasizes the importance of critically engaging with algorithmic tools to pursue anti-racist scholarship. "Redlining Culture" contributes to ongoing debates within curriculum studies about technology's role in reshaping historical narrative and offers crucial insights into racial representation in American literature and demonstrates the potential of digital humanities approaches to address systemic inequality.

Keywords: cultural studies; curriculum theory; algorithmic tools, Big Data.

we must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching...of undoing the 'racial calculus and political arithmetic that were centuries ago' and live into the present.

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, with a quotation from Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" (2016, p.13)

In *The Urban Revolution* (1970/2003), Henri Lefebvre introduces the concept of the "blind field" as part of his analysis of post-May '68 revolutionary possibility. Lefebvre offers a way to think about how socio-political developments, new terms of engagement in a broader social landscape can be obscured, serving to limit the possibilities of effective collective response. A way of thinking of this could be the blind spot in one's mirror while driving; while we may be disappointed that we missed the beautiful tree that we

passed on our drive, the more pressing issue is understanding what might be wrong with our mirror. Lefebvre suggests that a blind field emerges from the illumination of certain things with the result of a “blinding” to others. He suggests, “intellectual illumination has its limits, pushes aside or ignores some things, projects itself in certain places and not others, brackets certain pieces of information and highlights others” (p.30). He extends this by noting the social and psychological nature of the blind field and offers that “to understand them, we must take into account the power of ideology (which illuminates other fields or brings fictional fields into view) and the power of language. There are ‘blind fields’ whenever language fails us” (p.31). I want to suggest that the text *Redlining Culture* by Richard So—while certainly doing several things—primarily serves as a project of illuminating a blind field within historical understandings of literary criticism and the intersections of race, culture, and literature. To do this, So presents how new methods that include “big data” can serve to illuminate our inquiry in provocative ways.

The project of *Redlining Culture* is to innovatively challenge the ways in which postwar fiction and its production within a racialized publishing landscape has been understood as a multicultural remedy to the historical whiteness of US literature. Clearly stating his intent, So suggests,

the scholarly narrative of the rise of multiculturalism—a story that first took hold in the scholarship and then diffused broadly to the public—has in part obscured a more fundamental story. That story is about the economics of American literature—production, reception, and recognition—and how those economics have and continue to punish and exclude minority authors. (p.5)

To elaborate on these dynamics, So uses redlining as a metaphor for understanding how a structural system might enforce, encourage, and draw boundaries around what might be possible within the publishing industry. Offering a framing question of “if we could draw the American literary field like a mid-century Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) ⁱ map, what red lines would we see?” (p.2), the idea here mirrors much contemporary geographically informed social theorizing related to how historical housing and investment patterns as well as the policy structures that created and enforced them served to marginalize people of color and deny access to wealth and opportunity. In curriculum theorizing, Helfenbein (2021) notes the importance of a material critique in thinking about what spaces have to teach us, or what he terms “the spatio-curricular.” Housing and transportation are key factors in considering school and schooling in spatial terms and redlining shows how all these intra-actions are sedimented in socio-historical contexts. Drawing critical attention to these patterns, of course, enables one to dismiss notions of the “naturalness”, given, or even earned explanations for inequality. He argues that the importance of this work lies in,

how an awareness of quantitative patterns of racial inequality — what I have called “red lines” — in terms of both demographic and authorial representation and literary representation — can be useful to the work of the critique of power and the subject, the unravelling and interruption of discourses that make certain forms of racial subjectivity available and normalized. (p.15)

Redlining Culture begins with the compelling anecdote from Toni Morrison who remarked that she regretted not being able to do more for fiction writers of color during her tenure as editor at Random House. Noting how this seems to be somewhat ironic as Morrison is often placed as the beginning of a multicultural era of fiction in the United States, So suggests that a narrative was created in both literary and scholarly circles that reinforced this notion and served to close down other understandings of the period. Here we might think again of Lefebvre’s notion of the blind field being created by an illumination of other things — the illumination of a few authors (e.g. Morrison, Walker, etc...) obscured the persistence of a vast literary whiteness. Challenged by Morrison’s reflection on her work in that time, So brings new quantitative, big data-set modelling to the question of race and representation in postwar fiction. Expanding significantly a simple keyword approach to content analysis, So adds “collocation” to his metrics, a method that looks not just at the appearance of individual words but words in relation to each other. He describes this approach as one that “imagines language as a probabilistic distribution in which one is interested in the words that are most likely to appear next to that word” (p.44). Here the algorithm speaks to its strengths in pattern recognition and its attendance to relations. When this method is applied at significant scale, patterns become not only more nuanced but more convincing. Further, So contends that this approach is particularly valuable when attending to “subtle and stealthy” racial concepts (e.g. whiteness) and that it opens up analysis to “occluded lacunae and silences” that so often play a role in the perpetual discursive construction of race (p.45).

What *Redlining Culture* discovers is that not only does the brief influx of black authors to the Random House catalog end after Toni Morrison leaves her editorial post in 1983 but that the ways in which racial characters are represented in those works doesn’t change at all. This is to say that if the goal was one of increasing the racial diversity and complexity of characters in US fiction then the structural constraints of book reviews, literary awards, and academic acknowledgement (artfully referred to as reception, recognition, and consecration) proved much more powerful than the inclusion of a few authors, groundbreaking though they may be. While a powerful example of this type of critical, digital humanities scholarship, *Redlining Culture* offers curriculum scholars questions around the implications of new data science-based methodologies and new critical analyses they may bring to light.

Although numerous cautions around Big Data, algorithms, and most recently AI abound, So's work is an attempt to put advanced data science approaches in service of anti-racist work in the humanities. Indeed, the inclusion in *Redlining Culture* of the work of scholars such as Stuart Hall on issues of race and representation evidences a trans-disciplinary approach to critical work that resonates with scholars of curriculum. So suggests that his project is one of "the reverse engineering of quantitative racial categories" (p.168) and uses the capability of large data set analysis to approach a discursive understanding of racial designations in US literature. He builds on Hall's cultural studies approach and notes,

Discourse, as Foucault reminds us, is never just one statement or text; discourse only becomes meaningful as an aggregate of events spread out across a range of contexts and institutions, and only when aligned and coinciding does it produce a "discursive formation" relevant for the production of an object of knowledge, such as 'blackness.' (p.13)

Here the claim is a methodological one, insisting that "literary scholars have missed the story of cultural redlining because our available methods, such as close reading and historicism, are not well equipped to discern such patterns" (p.6); the project becomes one of using the algorithmic power of new technologies "to understand fiction at scale" (p.184). One cannot help but wonder what curriculum studies may have missed given the same limitations and reliance on similar methods. Could understanding *curriculum at scale* be a new intervention into the work of curriculum scholars?

Noting that what is "at stake is how we think about the relationship between data and cultural history and the relationship between numbers and reading" (p.6), *Redlining Culture* provides an important, if cautionary, appeal to the possibilities of algorithmic tools in pursuit of anti-racist interventions. The cautions remind us of the risks of reduction and reification and echoes the hermeneutics of suspicion via Cultural Studies; So notes that "quantification always means losing something" (p.6) and that both "the machine is not an ontological thinker" (p.19) and "the machine is a relational, not ontological, thinker" (p.115). The term assemblage has proven useful in contemporary curriculum theorizing and Wozolek (2021) builds on the work of Weheliye and defines it as "the messy and entangled intermingling of bodies that is productive in that it gives 'expression to realities, thoughts, bodies, affects, spaces, actions, ideas, and so on' (p.64). The critical question then becomes one of attending to what is lost in the defining work of creating these relations, this assemblage. The work of Katharine Hayles may be useful as well here as she notes that,

novels also function as cognitive devices in larger assemblages that include publishers, readers, reviewers, media, networked and conventional dissemination channels, and a host of other human and technical systems loosely

aggregating to form flexible and shifting cognitive assemblages through which choices, interpretations, and contexts operate as information flows through and between systems. (Hayles, 2017, p.201)

So then, while *Redlining Culture* points to the ways in which the assemblage (probably important to note this is not a term the author uses) of US publishing worked to marginalize authors of color during a time of proclaimed multiculturalism, it is important to note that we are still potentially talking about “weapons of math destruction” and the need for critical attention to “how computational algorithms used by banks and online search engines intensify racial stratification and oppression by articulating racial minorities as fixed, quantified types that reinforce existing patterns of inequality” (p.16; see also McNeil 2016). Rejecting this notion and seeking to put these new tools to work is not new and the author realizes and rightly connects this work to pre-algorithmic analysis such as the Cultural Studies via Birmingham. So invokes the term *leverage* in a way that cultural studies turned to qualitative (particularly ethnographic methods) to get to new understandings of the lived experiences on the margins. For So, these new computational tools enable “the idea that quantitative models, like machine classification, reveal both broad patterns as well as outliers and that the outliers can often expose important contingencies to the patterns, including how those patterns might be subverted or undone from within” (p.139). So employs close reading in the hopes of new understandings of the tools and technologies of exclusion and notes that these contours of exclusion are in fact part of the shaping of the patterns themselves. In thinking of method—either qualitative or quantitative, specific or in general—it seems precisely right that our work needs consistent troubling, or “in other words, we need to find the noise in our data, the things that precisely confound our models” (p.21).

Much like the acknowledgment that all curriculum is exclusionary given the impossibility of teaching everything, so too literature and its attempts at establishing or even re-establishing its classics involves choices that ultimately exclude. So notes that, “whether one is defending or deforming the canon, the canon always has a built-in selectivity. It needs a handful of texts to stand in for a broader literary tradition” (p.146). The ethics of how then to proceed are at the heart of both this project and curriculum studies itself. Curriculum Studies as a field has long wrestled with its history and what is at stake in the decisions necessary to take up the telling of the tale. Certainly, the age-old notion of understanding the past to inform and perhaps influence the present persists but curriculum scholars are increasingly conceiving of history as a intra-active practice; one that, in the words of Hendry *et al* (2023),

engages a sense of gleaning which allows us to attend to the importance of place, person, and practice, considering: what has been lost, gained, and turned from;

where this history has taken each and all and its abiding influence (outcomes and effects, disseminations, proliferations, etc.); its twists and turns upon scholars, and the field of curriculum theory. (p.2)

So then, what perhaps is most important in the offering of *Redlining Culture* to the field of curriculum theory is the recognition that both new technologies and the new methods that are enabled by them open up possibilities to reconsider these entangled histories, curriculum or otherwise. Ignoring or dismissing the methodological possibilities of Big Data, algorithmic inquiry, or even large-scale language modelling seems to not only be short-sighted but also ethically compromised if, as So would suggest, they offer new critiques of the histories we tell ourselves.

Much like the blind spots of Lefebvre, “to only gaze upon that red line to the exclusion of the things it aims to erase is to unwittingly participate in that process of erasure” (p.21); it is to miss what might be wrong with your mirror. Powerfully, So invokes Benjamin (2019) and notes that “the point is not simply to help others who have been less fortunate but to question the very idea of “fortune”: Who defines it, who distributes it, hoards it, and how was it obtained?” (Benjamin, pp.193-194). This call returns us to the epigraph by Christina Sharpe and the need for new tools, new methods, new ways to become undisciplined as we cautiously explore algorithmic tools in the pursuit of anti-racism, as we take up the ethical charge of curriculum history within this vast literary whiteness.

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¹ HOLC maps refer to the Home Owner’s Loan Corporation who created maps as part of the City Survey Program of the 1930s. The “Residential Security” maps marked neighborhood characteristics such as housing conditions, transportation, amenities, and the racial and ethnic composition of its residents (see Rothstein, 2018). A first draft of this abstract was generated by ChatGPT.