

Book Review Symposium

Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, New York: NYU Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781479837243 (paper); ISBN: 9781479849949 (cloth)

In *Algorithms of Oppression*, Safiya Umoja Noble makes powerfully present the representations of black and brown bodies, particularly those of women and girls, that exist within large scale information networks, like Google Search. It is a timely book that strikes at the heart of a topic that is too often overlooked in purportedly critical studies of algorithms, data, and technologies. I say this as someone guilty of this transgression himself. My own work in this area has focused predominantly on class and socioeconomic impacts, but as Noble writes in one of the more powerful passages of the book, “I am claiming that you cannot have social justice and a politics of recognition without an acknowledgement of how power—often exercised simultaneously through White supremacy and sexism—can skew the delivery of credible and representative information” (p.84).

Drawing on her own research as well as scholarship from cultural and media studies, Noble slowly builds her alternative to the current condition—one which is not utopian, but rather grounded firmly in critical race theory and black feminist traditions. Eschewing the neoliberal limits of projects like Black Girls Code, Noble pushes for “increased nonprofit and public research funding to explore alternatives to commercial information platforms” (p.185). In a postscript written after the 2016 US Presidential election, Noble admits that such a project may no longer seem possible. Writing in the early days of 2019 with the 2020 US Presidential election already looming on the horizon, I find her observations all the more prescient. In the rest of this review, and in the interests of creating the dialogue *Antipode* has so generously offered to

facilitate, I will pursue two directions I think might push Noble's work to address that oft-raised question of "what is to be done?" I do so by pursuing an engagement with how "search results and the power that such results have on our ways of knowing and relating" (p.71) play out geographically—how they serve to construct, delimit, and elide space and place. I will ask three questions related to geography, not simply to tout the wonders of Geography as a discipline, but specifically because of the ways that it offers a hopeful praxis for the consideration of these larger structures of institutional racism and sexism, of the neoliberal and neocolonial project.

Space and spatial relations are not the primary focus of Noble's work here, but they emerge at times throughout the piece. For example, in her discussion of internet pornography as "an expansion of neoliberal capitalist interests" (p.104), Noble touches upon how the location of the production of pornography is highly concentrated in a few places while simultaneously driving search word optimization practices that occur throughout the web. This commodification of language, here of language around the sexualization of black women and girls, is part and parcel of what Thornton (2018) has termed "linguistic capitalism". Following Thornton, I wonder how tying together the very centralized nature of the production of internet pornography with the decentralized effects it has had upon language through search engine optimization practices might offer new ways of contesting the knowledges and representations produced through said practices.

Similarly, Noble discussed in passing how the exploitation of black bodies extends far beyond their representation in search engines, pointing out that they also "provide the most grueling labor for blood minerals, and they do the dangerous, toxic work of dismantling e-waste" (p.164). Here we see the edges of a system that extends through the seeming ephemerality of search engine results in a web browser through to the broken bodies and lives of black men and women across the globe. While somewhat outside the scope of her work, I want to urge geographers to think through how we might tie together representation and exploitation in digital systems and playing out across various sociomaterial scales.

One way I think we might think through this is through how the geographic literature has worked through the concept of “technological redlining” (p.1). In my own work on this concept, I have focused on the limits of knowledge and experience created through a reliance upon spatial search and the resulting effects upon social, political, and economic experiences and opportunities (Thatcher 2012, 2013). But, to my own detriment, I have not focused on how these impacts are particularly pernicious along the axes of race and gender. Here, I see the opportunity for geographers to think *spatially* about the material effects of these knowledge dissemination systems, to think through the intersection of their construction and experience with the construction and experience of space and place. Jefferson’s (2017, 2018) pieces are important steps in this direction and one with which I hope to see more geographers engage in the coming years.

In summary, Noble has produced an important and timely work that builds slowly to its powerful conclusion. She brings a critical race studies and black feminist perspective to the study of algorithms and data in society. What I would ask her, and also challenge the readers of *Antipode* to consider, is how these racist and sexist forms of knowledge production play out in material ways across variegated spaces and places. I have suggested three ways above, but there are undoubtedly many other approaches. None of this is to suggest that *Algorithms of Oppression* is not a worthwhile book. It is. Full stop. Ultimately, it is simply to ask for and hope for “more” of this thinking because it is so necessary at this moment of triumphant neoliberalism.

References

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