

ARGUMENT

Seeing Race In a Pandemic

How the physical environment affects our experience of difference.

BY ADRIENNE BROWN | JULY 1, 2020, 3:41 PM

The material environment we move through, I wrote in my first book, *The Black Skyscraper: Architecture and the Perception of Race*, shapes how we perceive race. Focusing on the skyscraper's emergence on the American scene in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, I showed how the new densities, vantage points, and urban scales shaped by this architecture affected people's capacities to see and read bodies as racially marked.

Skyscrapers first rose to prominence at a time when understandings of what race was, where it resided in or on the body, and strategies for recognizing and reading its alleged characteristics were all in flux. As Reconstruction ended, Jim Crow rose, and millions made their way to growing urban centers, many Americans turned to law, science, and culture to stabilize racial definitions and categorizations. Skyscraper architecture, however, unsettled the very ground upon which Americans perceived and threw a wrench in efforts to shore up certainties around race. Given that everyone appears as a dark speck when viewed from high enough, the skyscraper raised questions in this period about how and whether race would remain legible in an urbanizing nation where tall buildings were challenging what it meant to see in the first place.

Black Skyscraper focuses on the specific social and historical conditions of the late 19th century that led writers and architects in this period to understand the early skyscraper in racial terms. But this early test case underscores how pervasive a role the material environment plays in shaping how we perceive and understand race across historical periods and locations. Our habits and patterns for seeing and knowing race are not timeless but taught; not transcendental but developed within the specific environments we navigate.

Indeed, recent events, especially the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing police violence against Black Americans and communities emblemized by the murder of George Floyd, point to enduring entanglements of racial perception, racial hierarchies, and the material environment. These yoked catastrophes of health and policing, which have

disproportionately devastated minority communities, shape and have been shaped by the physical contexts in which these crises unfold.

Density's role in the pandemic is one place where the relationship between race and the material environment comes into focus. Some of the initial concerns about skyscrapers and density in growing urban centers had to do with anxieties that these structures might weaken the ability to make out racial distinctions and, by extension, control interracial contact deemed by many as unhealthy and degenerative. Concerns about being able to discern and manage racial populations helped drive the growing institutionalization of redlining—the systematic exclusion of Black Americans from certain neighborhoods and services—which concentrated Black people into overcrowded urban neighborhoods while mass state subsidies supported white flight out of cities to low-density suburbs in the first half of the 20th century.

It is easy to see the long afterlife of density's racialization when observing neighborhoods disproportionately affected by COVID-19—many of which are the same areas marked by bankers, urban planners, and government officials in the first half of the 20th century as unfit for investment due to their minority populations. But even as the racial consequences of these early redlining maps persist, the environmental mechanisms for their endurance have shifted with the emergence of new forms of racial inequity.

As **ProPublica** reported in April, the higher COVID-19 infection rates in predominately African American and Hispanic neighborhoods do not seem to correlate with population density. For example, Chicago's Englewood neighborhood, which had one of the highest infection rates in the city also has fewer households per mile than many other neighborhoods. ProPublica's preliminary findings suggest that the number of people who share a household rather than housing density itself may be larger driver of infections in minority neighborhoods. The housing crisis following the 2008 economic crisis devastated neighborhoods such as Englewood targeted by subprime lending practices. The massive expropriation of wealth from these communities that resulted from the economic collapse has led to larger extended families living under one roof, a factor likely contributing to the differential spread of COVID-19. Although the city of Chicago declared in a recent advertising campaign that "COVID-19 Doesn't See Race," the city's infection rates point to the tethered history of racial sight and differential investment.

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racial perception in our changing material world. While the act of wearing a mask in public to prevent the spread COVID-19 was first framed as a matter of public health, it quickly transformed into a symbol of sovereignty when largely white and largely maskless crowds began descending on capitals and statehouses in early spring to protest stay-at-home orders for infringing on their freedoms.

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After several new incidents of police-sanctioned murder, those early protests about individual rights gave way to much larger protests against systemic racism. But the remnants of these earlier protests endure in isolated and, at times belligerent, acts of dissent staged by those unwilling to wear masks in stores and venues requiring them. It's rare for a week to go by without new video of a white patron becoming incensed when required to wear masks to receive services. The outrage provoked by perceived infractions threatening one's sovereignty reverberates with a much older racial ideology that understood power over oneself to be a categorically Anglo-American trait. Social theorists at the turn of the 20th century, including then historian Theodore Roosevelt, alleged that Americans of specific European origins—conditioned by both their racial makeup and centuries of frontier living—had acquired a heightened capacity for self-control. That quality made them inherently fit to rule themselves as well as conquered “savage” races. Such theories construed whiteness as the right to own and occupy space. Faith in racial dominion underpins scenes of white patrons in grocery stores, ride-sharing cars, and parks who believe in their inalienable right to take up space at the expense of others.

African Americans, however, offer a different rationale for their discomfort with the public mandate to wear masks. Their concerns stem not from a sense of spatial supremacy but from the victimization that stemmed from it and was used to justify racially biased forms of surveillance and policing. By obscuring access to people's faces as well as potentially impeding one's own sight, masks disrupt habits for seeing and reading race from the bodies of others. In the United States, a nation physically and socially designed to scrutinize and contain minority bodies, changes to racial perception pose real threats. African Americans have described their concerns that

wearing masks would heighten racist assumptions about black criminality, making them even more susceptible to surveillance and harassment. The disproportionate punishing of minorities for violating public health ordinances instituted in the wake of COVID-19, coupled with reports of masked Black men being questioned by police for appearing suspicious, reflects the Catch-22 of mask-wearing for many Black Americans.

Disruptions to norms of racial identification have historically been followed by systemic efforts to produce and enforce structures capable of doing the work instead. Race-based methods of property appraisal in the early 20th century and facial recognition technology in the 21st are examples of systems designed to produce and enforce alleged racial truths more effectively than subjective individuals can, generally with discriminatory results. The intensified policing of Black communities in the immediate wake of the pandemic may be linked to not only to the civic and economic anxieties unleashed by the crisis, but the spatial and perceptual crises it has also fostered.

But with alterations to racial perception also arise new abolitionist and emancipatory visions. To return to a lesson gleaned from *Black Skyscraper*, whereas white writers such as Henry James and William Dean Howells expressed great anxiety about the effect of tall buildings on our ability to see and know race, Black writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Nella Larsen imagined the skyscraper's capacity to scramble the senses as an opportunity for dismantling racial hierarchies by exposing their arbitrariness.

The pandemic and the uprisings in response to police violence seem to also be seeding experiments in racial perception and liberation—the oversized calligraphy declaring “Black Lives Matter” and “Defund the Police” being drawn on a growing number of streets in the United States, at a scale reflective of the urgency of the demand; the virtual DJ sets emerging in the early days of the pandemic, reframing the relationship between sound and sociality; and the new habits of attention being cultivated in the wake of shelter-in-place orders, forcing many to rethink their orientation to the natural, material, and social worlds around them.

Protocols for perceiving race are difficult to disrupt, especially since habits for racial assessment and meaning are generally learned informally rather than through explicit pedagogy. But the growing emphasis on apprehending structures of systemic racism—as opposed to thinking we can teach ourselves to ignore race or override our own biases—may be the beginning of a larger shift in how and where we think and see race.

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