

Interrelation + Reduction: How Should We Examine Racism?

Drawing from Avtar Brah's chapter "Difference, Diversity, and Differentiation," in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*.

In 2020, racism remains a rampant system of domination that is deeply harmful to many members of our communities. Let's unpack a few quotations from Avtar Brah's work and challenge some of the ways we might consider 'difference' and racism.

Sisterhood + Structures of Social Relations

"Our gender is constituted and represented differently according to our differential location within the global relations of power."

What does this mean?

- We should not assume **homogeneity** (sameness) of experience when we consider the category of woman.
- This means that issues affecting women should not be analyzed without also taking into consideration a much broader, global context of social inequality.
- So, women who are positioned differently within **global relations of power** experience the world *differently* by virtue of their social position or condition.
- For example, **historical trajectories**, **class status**, and **cultural experiences** both within and between communities create a uniqueness in experience between women.

To sum: We need to take care not to assume that categories are all-encompassing.

Essentialism + Reductionism

"...the term 'black' does not have to be constructed in essentialist terms. It can have different political and cultural meanings in different contexts."

So, what does this mean?



- **Essentialism** is the idea of a shared essence that is able to transcend both historical and cultural boundaries.
- In other words, it's an approach that considers all things to have a set of characteristics, or attributes, that are, at their core, **cross-cultural** and **absolute**.
- The problem with essentialism, however, when we consider categories like 'woman', or 'black', is that it is an unrepresentative distillation of human difference, or **reductionist**.
- **Be careful**: It can still be useful to center a category for political mobilization (eg. the Black Lives Matter movement), but it would be wrong to assume that that category is all-encompassing or fixed.

To sum: Essentialism can lead to a potentially disadvantageous reduction of human difference.

Racialisation + History

"...different groups have been racialised differently under varying circumstances, and on the basis of different signifiers of 'difference'."

What does this mean?

- First, we need to define the word '**racialization**'. Racialisation is a process by which certain meanings are imposed onto bodies.
- These meanings are **historically specific**, and they are **malleable** (not stable or eternal).
- Second, racialisations are produced & reproduced via specific **economic**, **political**, and **cultural** circumstances.
- As a result, *racisms* are historically specific as well. Racisms have many similarities, but they can be expressed differently as well.

To sum: In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the way racism is expressed today, we need to pay attention to its historical contexts.

So, why is all this important?

Paying attention to the diversity within categories can help us not to make false assumptions about them as an entirety. Additionally, **thinking more conscientiously about the articulation of (and intersections between) oppressions is essential in order to create strategies which challenge them all.**

Bibliography: Brah, A. (1996). Difference, Diversity, and Differentiation. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, 95 - 126. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.4324/9780203974919>