

Race and Place Research Project
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April 5, 2019

Perceptions of Belonging in Nature:
The Urban Outdoors Edition

Chain-linked fences. Asphalt. Faded paint. All stereotypical characteristics of what an urban recreational space does and should look like due to popular media portrayals. What does this mean though? Does it matter how the media shows urban spaces used for activities? Who cares what type of people are displayed in these portrayals? The real question regarding this topic is, how do these portrayals, including the type of people within them, add to the public perception of who belongs where in our society and with access to what?

There are connections to be made regarding how the media displays urban outdoor recreational spaces, such as basketball courts and “parks,” and the idea of race and place in our society. The website for the Brooklyn Bridge Park, in the section on the multitude of basketball courts offered, displays photographs of the “park” with its color dyed asphalt and metallic fences (Brooklyn Bridge Park). There are a few patches of green grass next to a group of picnic tables which concludes the amount of greenery in this space. What else is shown in these photographs are the people who have access to the park, but mostly interestingly is the fact that there are staggeringly more African Americans pictured than those of any other racial status. Does this portrayal of this park create an idea of placement in the eyes and minds of the viewers?

Personally, coming from a small town in rural Wisconsin, I had not yet thought about subconscious categorizing of people. Looking back, I can recall my first glimpse at

what it looked like for people in urban areas to be outside and what they were doing. This first exposure was while watching the Disney Channel Original movie, *Jump In!* The movie is roughly about a boy who has to choose between playing double-dutch competitively and boxing. I thought that I was watching a sports movie, and the fact that Corbin Bleu was cute didn't hurt, but what I was really seeing was an instillment of racial placement of African American citizens in urban areas. The characters played in the city streets, on the sidewalks, and behind the silver links of a chain fence. There were no signs of areas that I could clearly and undoubtedly identify as "nature." Being that all of the characters were black, adds to the connection between the media, beliefs surrounding racial placement, and the environment. Unconsciously, a young audience was introduced to a type of environmental racism that is seen all too often and the media portrays a sense of normality between what we seen in the environment and who we see using or inhabiting it.

Speaking to this effect of racial placement perceptions produced by media sources, there comes the idea of natural dominion. Stephen Kellert states in his book *Birthright*, "Human mastery over nature is most profoundly reflected in the design and development of the modern city," (Kellert 83). This attests to the idea that the continuation of urban areas were historically for the prospering of human society rather than the prospering of the environment. The problem that follows, other than the obvious environmental effects, is the populating and segmenting of these urban areas. Now that they have been developed, who is going to live there and in what spaces are

they able to receive access to involving nature? Human mastery over nature coincides with human mastery over other humans. The urban outdoors are masked by concrete and color schemes lacking greenery but they are still categorized as activity spaces, as appointed in the city planning documents and permits. Kellert discusses Central Park as a beneficial green area, which is not accessible to all groups of citizen in New York City, and how the most beneficial contribution is the parks open space and environmental balance attempts (Kellert 93). What Kellert does not account for is the misclassification of “parks” and recreational areas set aside in lower class urban communities. He suggests that parks are beneficial for a city environment to reestablish a more connected foothold with nature and merge developed civilization with our earthly ones. However, urban parks don’t always and are not portrayed in media as being one of Kellert’s successful park spaces. Instead, urban parks are seen as being correctly covered in unnatural materials and without any sign of life other than the users; a potential and harmful effect of these portrayals in the dehumanization of the groups using the areas and negatively associating their existence with connections to nature. By promoting the normalization of economically challenged and racially homogenous groups of people, specifically minorities, in urban settings, the media creates a justification folder in the psyche of society.

Due to media dispositions, whether knowingly or not, recreational spaces in such urban areas appear to be normal or typical in a real-world setting. According to a study done on the levels of physical activity of children in both urban and rural settings, there is a significant difference in the amount of activity that urban children receive than

those in a rural setting (Sandercock). If you were to look at the urbanized parks and recreation spaces, this would make sense. There is not a good amount of green space or space in general for children to utilize in terms of physical activity. Rural children were not only found to be outdoors more, but were engaged in a higher amount of unstructured and unrestricted play (Sandercock). After dissecting the appearance of these parks or spaces in popular and subtle media, you can begin to see that restrictions are what they are built or based around and the type of activities that are done there fall into the same category. Later in the examination of differences in physical activity, it is stated, “The combination of safe space for unstructured activity and access to sports facilities enjoyed by suburban children may explain this finding [referring to the increase levels of physical activity in suburban and rurally located children] but socioeconomic status, seasonal effects and racial factors should not be discounted,” (Sandercock). This finding suggests that urban confined recreation and outdoor activity spaces are limiting in their offerings to those who inhabit these areas. Research here is stating that safety, economic situations, and racial factors are important to analyze. These spaces that are deemed to be the recreational areas are confining and may be without social security, and so why would we as a society continue to allow for them to go on in this fashion? A research finding regarding park usage in urban and suburban areas stated, “Research has demonstrated that those living in lower income neighborhoods have lower levels of perceived safety and higher levels of concern about child safety...” (Perver). Relating back to the original associations that I have presented, media portrayals suggest that this is a normal setting in urban areas and that povern,

racially biased urban areas carry the characteristics of a dangerous and uncertain place. Not only are media portrayals of urban recreational spaces giving the public perceptions such as these, but they also add to the attitudes of urban residents regarding their desire to use and allow their families to use outdoor spaces. As urban parks continue to normalize, regardless of their lack of environmental benefits, children lose their necessary exposure. Kellert states in his chapter titled, *Childhood*, “A backyard or nearby park can provide children with a wealth of opportunity for examining, exploring, discovering, imagining, fantasizing, coping, and solving problems,” (Kellert 136). This idea that children benefit from nature park exposure excludes the parks and spaces associated with urbanized areas. Exclusivity is now taking place of the dominion in Kellert’s terms and in the views of the public, and this is largely due to the ways in which the media is encapsulating the “typical,” in other words stereotypical, places that are urban recreational areas.

Not only are dramatic and drastic media portrayals hindering the way that the American public views urban spaces, but they also alter the way that urban inhabitants view themselves and their roles in the environment. As mentioned previously, media adds to the unsafe feelings and attitudes of urbanized areas, which keeps people inside and away from the dangers, but what about how the portrayals affect the self-views of these people. Carolyn Finney is quoted in her book chapter titled, *Jungle Fever*, “For African Americans, the past and present are littered with representations that aggravate our collective sense of self as Americans and human beings,” (Finney 32). A statement such as this suggests that the African American sense of self in this country has been

infiltrated by misrepresentations and miscommunications that have the power to alter perceptions of both people outside of the racial status as well as those who identify with it. As the media continues to use African Americans as the main utilizers of inadequate urban parks and recreational systems, they enforce the mentality of group belonging and identity in regards to these places. Notions of linking a group of people to an identifiably negative space create a harsh sense of acceptance that these areas are where African Americans, and potentially other minorities, in urban areas “fit” in the scheme of society.

The issues surrounding deeply rooted, negative connotations in relation to the type of people who utilize the urban outdoors, should be ones that deserves resolutions. One potential defenses against the environmental inequalities at play would be the implementation of community gardens in areas that do not contain adequate green space. A study conducted by Kimberly J. Shrew and colleagues suggests that community gardens hold potential to be spaces of interracial connection because involvement requires, “free choice and self determination,” (Shrew). Not only would community gardens give access to a physical connection with nature, which Kellert advocates for, but it would also allow for interracial media portrayals of the urban outdoors. These portrayals would at least be more politically correct and racially diverse and therefore release some amounts of tension encircling inaccurate media portrayals. Even though that a community garden would be a viable start to correcting a much bigger issue, there are still setbacks that can occur in this process that resort back to old ways of media exposure in terms of exclusivity. For example, the website titled, *Run Wild My Child*, is

used as an online tool for people with “tips on finding nature in urban areas,” (RWMC). Although this site offers some insight as to where to find nature sanctuaries in urban settings, the media format itself suggests a degree of exclusivity in the fact that the pictures on the site are all of white toddlers playing in grass. The efforts that are being made by the creators of the site are being overshadowed by the way that they are making nature seem available and to whom. These media platforms are adding to the already existing stereotypes of “nice” and acceptable recreational areas and “how” to use them. The how in this sense would be a suggestion as to where white families can bring their children rather than how all children can have access to nature.

There are trends to be seen in media and the way that they present people and what types of environments they are presented in. As of now, the media is incorrectly categorizing urban parks and outdoor spaces as areas contaminated by asphalt, chain-linked fences, and povert minority groups, specifically African Americans. Due to depictions like this, the public eye gets turned away from the inadequacies of the environments that African Americans are pictured in. The idea of the urban outdoors has been unjustly normalized to our society and therefore allows for harmful effects not only to the perceptions of the public but also regarding the perceptions of those who are wrongfully depicted. Nature has been found to be a great asset to the development of children and the betterment of humanity but quality nature is restricted to areas outside of lower-class urban settings. The seemingly exclusivity of nature is now impeding on the potential success of children in areas that are deemed to be in the urban outdoors. Although there may be ideas on how to increase nature exposure in urban settings,

media portrayals are still highly suggestive of an exclusive environment. I would find interest in finding a way to implement a city regulated, government enforced system in which green space must be available in urban areas with a certain number of persons per capita measurement. Research should continue in this field to eliminate the way that the media is able to stereotypically show minority groups as “deserving” of their environmental situation and nature based placement. The media should be aware that these stereotypes and inaccurate portrayals have lasting effects on both people who reside in an urban setting and those who observe their peers solely through media outlets.

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