

## Reading Audiences: A Reflection on the Politics of the Production of Racism

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Stephanie Houston Grey's response to our essay on "Genetics, Race, and Crime," clearly illustrates the utility of audience studies. Her response highlights the fact that discourse is clearly open to multiple interpretations, for we could never have anticipated her reply in advance. That our essay would be interpreted as Grey does—as one that is primarily social scientific in nature and that constitutes an attack upon progressivism, ideology, and critical studies—seems to us so counter to the text that we constructed that we would not have believed such an interpretation to be possible if we hadn't had this audience member's response brought to our attention. Nor did we perceive our essay as a response to, or an attack on, Grey's prior essay.

First, our essay does not seem to us to invite a reading as a text operating within the dominant "gestalt" of social scientific methodologies. To move outside the singular text, as Grey suggests we should do, the history of all three of us as authors is a history that has given an overwhelmingly predominant place to critical scholarship. Indeed, we suspect our social scientific colleagues would be struck by fits of laughter at the thought that we might have written an essay with a "fully scientific style" (to use Grey's description of it). As Grey notes, we say explicitly in our text that our

goal is to subsume some of the tools of quantitative methodologies within a "broader model of scholarship as inquiry" (6). Moreover, the quantitative portion of the essay takes up about two of the nine pages of the analysis section. Granted, we titled the sections "method" and "results", but we were under some pressure from a quantitative reviewer who wanted the qualitative analysis replaced or subsumed under the quantitative analysis. Given that our project is a hybrid one, we made some stylistic concessions to invite in a diversity of readers. These do not vitiate our goal of "integrating qualitative and quantitative research within a paradigm of critical inquiry" (19). Readers should also note that a table giving more information about the statistics was submitted with the essay, but was not published, nor were the paragraphs the participants read.

We did, of course, make reductive choices. All scholarship (indeed, all languaging) is a process of reduction. Critical scholars typically (and necessarily) reduce a text or set of texts to a few pertinent observations. Grey's own work reduces social scientific work throughout history (if not all of Western thought) into a few themes and assumptions (notice her title, "The statistical war on equality"). We were careful to specify that this reductive process provided limited answers. The value of the answer is not in any claim that they provide a "truth" (her word, not ours), but rather in the extent to which it broadens the potentials and relationships we are able to consider, or the specificity with which we are able to consider them. Grey suggests that our biases show in our framing of the various passages in the nature vs. nurture fash-

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ion, but we formulated those passages based on our critical reading of what the reviews of the literature actually emphasized. We maintain that this was, indeed, a significant issue in the reviews, and therefore a legitimate, nay important, starting point for concerns in research in this area, especially for progressives.

To the extent that she recognizes our use of the critical qualitative methodology, Grey seems to imply that audience studies is just another social scientific methodology, tainted because it is "traditional" and associated with "fields such as sociology and psychology." We don't, in fact, use a triangulation method. As we pointed out in our text, audience studies draw heavily on culture studies and critical textual studies for its methodological roots. If Grey is going to purport to do a critique of the inherent biases of an epistemology and methodology, it is the audience study methodology that Grey needs to analyze in depth, since it is this methodology that is the centerpiece of our essay and it is this methodology to which the quantitative analysis is subordinated. In fact, audience study methodologies combine interpretive, critical, and humanistic impulses. Reading the "texts" produced by audiences is not that much different from critical readings of any other texts. The key difference is that it asks scholars to attend to the discourse, and hence incorporate the voices, of a large number of people who are neither academics nor world leaders. Our readers in this study are Georgia undergraduates, but we have ongoing studies with broader lay groups. The fact that we invite the community of critical scholars to attend to these voices should not be taken to mean that critical studies of historical documents or even mere statement of personal opinion does not continue to be an important component of scholarly dialogue. We said that explicitly in our original essay when we wrote that "This is not to suggest that structural or textual analyses should be replaced by audience studies, but rather than audience studies should continue to be dili-

gently integrated into the mix" (19). Why then, might Grey have interpreted our essay as arising from a social scientific rather than critical paradigm? One reason is that she applies an essentialist framework to methodologies. She refers to the "conflicting *gestalts*" underlying our research approach and hers and in her work she suggests (albeit in shifting and imprecise fashion that makes it difficult to pin down) that certain research methodologies have inherent tendencies. We suspect that for Grey, any substantial use of social scientific methods would essentially contaminate a project. In contrast, we hold a conjuncturalist perspective. We believe that neither ideologies nor methodologies are composed of unchanging components with inherent relationships to one another in all situations. We think that there are good reasons for believing that different ideological components come together in different contexts to different effects. Similarly, we think that different methodological components can be blended to answer different kinds of questions.

A second reason that Grey might have interpreted our essay in this unanticipated fashion relates to her dislike of the question we asked and the answers we found. The question we asked was basically, how do non-academics who read contemporary racist texts and replies to them understand these texts? To ask such a question indeed implies that critical scholars might not have all of the answers to that question, and as such, it might be somewhat unsettling to those who think they already have all the answers. But the question is surely not an attack on critical scholarship or progressivism as an undertaking. As scholars, teachers, and activists, we are acutely aware of the difficulties that progressives have had in eradicating racism. We think that there has been something of a stalemate, if not a reactionary movement, in the past few decades. We are willing to take intellectual risks, to try new methods and ask new questions in new ways in order to see if we can help break that

logjam. We don't think this is an attack on progressivism, for we see ourselves as critical progressives. Our willingness to break out of the old academic boxes might be threatening for progressives who are more wedded to their own sense of certainty than to the desire for change.

The answer we found also might be profoundly unsettling for progressives who are wedded to the idea that the environment is the "god" term of 20th century progressivism and genetics is the "devil" term of that era. Indeed, the answer was not one that we anticipated. Although Grey thinks it is "naive" and a "straw hypothesis" to have thought that the heightened attention that books like *The Bell Curve* receive from reviews of them might actually spread racism, even though the reviews themselves were unfavorable, we have to plead guilty to having had that silly thought. We thought that, perhaps, this was one of those mechanisms of "subtle" racism that go unsuspected. We thought that perhaps the progressivism of the reviews was less persuasive than the racism of the books themselves to the average lay reader, so that the net effect was an increase in racism. If our world is socially constructed via discourse, why is that not a reasonable hypothesis? Moreover, our hypothesis wasn't entirely wrong because while our study did not show that the reviews increased racist attitudes, it did suggest that people use components of such materials in order to bolster their own views—so, what reviewers write might be important.

We were wrong about our original hunch, but when we looked closely (with our critical and interpretive lenses) at the texts produced by our readers, we found that they didn't line up the world in the neat "environment/good vs. genes/racism" way that is the standard assumption of most scholarly texts today. We thought that was worth sharing with other progressives. We didn't present it as a definitive conclusion ("It cannot provide definitive conclusions," we wrote (19).) We do not deny that other critical scholars reading the same texts would notice different things.

We do suggest that this possibility is worth serious consideration among those progressives who have been promoting environmentalist perspectives as a cure for racist thought. Call us silly, but we just keep hoping that there might be a more effective way to approach the progressive agenda.

Grey does engage this possibility in one substantive fashion. She asserts something like the claim that individualism is really just a part of racism and or geneticism (her pointillist style again makes us cautious in trying to reconstruct precisely what she is trying to argue). This association does not hold true for our respondents, since both those who scored relatively low on racism and those who scored high on it manifested strong individualist attitudes. But Houston Grey would apparently rule out as tainted any conclusions based on methods that actually ask people what they think with regard to scholarly conclusions about their attitudes. There are, however, other ways of arguing the case. Historically, eugenics was associated with nationalism rather than individualism. To take an alternative approach, logically eugenics is associated with familialism or tribalism. Houston Grey would need to provide an argument that builds a tighter relationship between individualism and eugenics, because individual merit can be "earned" at least as well as "inherited" (and these are two different approaches). In fact, contemporary liberal ideology survives rhetorically by resting its weight on the alleged "earned" quality of the privileges and disproportionate access to resources of some individuals versus others. Rhetorical comfort with notions of inherited merit belong to a rather earlier era (at least until recent political events).

Finally, we are sorry that Grey was troubled by our characterization of her essay as pointillist. We meant by the term pretty much what she suggests by it. We did not anticipate that, in the context of her attack on Western thought with its linear methods, and given her celebration of aesthetics, she would then take

this as an insulting term that provided a “strident mischaracterization of [her] work.” We merely assumed that she was trying to utilize a writing style consistent with her argument, and we were simply being cautious about our ability to interpret her correctly given what we under-

stood as her argument and her style. Again, we suggest that our failure to interpret each other as expected indicates the utility of taking seriously audience responses, rather than granting exclusive privilege to an “originary” text.

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