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RESEARCH

Subjugating Other Cultural Narratives in the Construction of Immersive Environments

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This Paper feeds into the current transcultural debate surrounding tensions between the construction of immersive technologies within westernised paradigms. In the construction of immersive spaces, tech companies have unconsciously subjugated other cultural frameworks and perspectives. Safiya Umoja Noble's term 'technological redlining' succinctly articulates this subjugation in her book 'Algorithms of Oppression' where she says 'The power of algorithms in the age of neoliberalism and the ways those digital decisions reinforce oppressive social relationships and enact new modes of racial profiling, which I have termed technological redlining. By making visible the ways that capital, race, and gender are factors in creating unequal conditions, I am bringing light to various forms of technological redlining that are on the rise'. (Noble 2018: 01) These assumptions are systematic of what Jean-Paul Sartre referred to in the last century as Neocolonialism (Sartre 2001: 2). Political systems intentionally subjugating other cultural narratives, in order to impose colonial paradigms concerning social activity. These are still the dominant perspectives, still controlling global narratives. 'Neocolonialism can be described as the subtle propagation of socio-economic and political activity by former colonial rulers aimed at reinforcing capitalism, neo-liberal globalization'. (Taiwo; Accessed 02/05/19) Umoja Noble highlights a key challenge to address this balance, which is in the construction of any digitised decision-making platform, the key point is to understand that all initial mathematical formulations that drive automated decision-making are made by human beings who exist in a specific socio-cultural context.

Keywords: transcultural; immersive; paradigms; algorithms; Neocolonialism; neo-liberalism

Technological Redlining

Do not beg *to try and seek* reason from people who *burnt* down your house after looting its contents and are now accusing you of being homeless and underdeveloped.

I wrote the sentence above in the style of an African proverb, marking a change in an intellectual strategy as we try to book a seat at the global table of political manifestation. As we Africans wake up around the world, we are increasingly creating our own table, in order to redefine and reclaim our cultural birth-rights. This Article feeds into the current transcultural debates surrounding the tensions between cultural constructions and immersive spaces using, decision-making technologies within the culture industry, currently underpinned by westernised neo-colonial paradigms. The point being, in the devised construction of various digitally immersive spaces, tech companies have unconsciously subjugated alternative aesthetic and political perceptions, with regards to other cultural frameworks and perspectives. This has the effect of Africans from the continent and the diaspora prioritizing perspective of ourselves viewed from westernised discourses; which has never successfully unpacked its inherently prejudicial assumptions. This can be seen in the algorithms behind search engines like Google, Safiya Umoja Noble's term 'technological redlining' succinctly articulate this subjugation in her book 'Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism' where she says

This book is about the power of algorithms in the age of neoliberalism and the ways those digital decisions reinforce oppressive social relationships and enact new modes of racial profiling, which I have termed *technological redlining*. By making visible the ways that capital, race, and gender are factors in creating unequal conditions, I am bringing light to various forms of technological redlining that are on the rise. (Noble 2018: 1)

I would like to declare, my opposition to the concept concerning race as a way to define differences in human beings. The concept of race, is an illusion that seeks to replace the concept of culture and heritage as ways to articulate differences in

humanity. A difference in skin pigment does not indicate a difference in race. The word race is divisive, as it suggests that there are separate branches of humans who are running to win the prize of being the quintessential representation of an advanced human being. In this obfuscated narrative, westernised ideas of the contemporary Avant Garde, associated with white Europeans, will be the perceived winner, while all the other branches losers, destined to be defined by a neo-colonial hegemony. The fact that all humans were and are originally African, is a genetic fact. The human diaspora expanded around the world at different times, not because of an existential 'race', but due to its inherent nature for exploration and adaptation. The concept of race provided a convenient reason for the subjugation of certain groups and the power of 'manifest destiny' for others as seen in the apparent rise in white nationalism within Europe and North America.

These assumptions are systematic of what Jean-Paul Sartre referred to in the last century as Neo-colonialism mentioned above (Sartre 2001). The point is that these political systems were intentionally subjugating other cultural narratives, in order to double down on their previous colonial paradigms; cementing their values of lived space and social activity in post-colonial countries after independence. Currently, they are still the dominant values that underpin independent post-colonial nations and their key institutions; the Neo-colonialist, still control present global narratives of social practice and their perceived value. The principles within the coloniser's tool box, of the rule of law, democracy, freedom and liberalism, underpinned by the emergence of the key institutions, were instituted during the age of Reason or simply put 'the Enlightenment'. These principles were not meant to include women, enslaved or colonized people. As a Yoruba man born in Britain, I would have been seen as property to be worked, bought and sold during the enlightenment period. Therefore, these noble values of democracy, freedom and liberty, would have not applied to me. I would not have had any human rights because apparently, we lost that right in this fabricated race to be an advanced human. There is still a measure of subconscious bias in the DNA of these institutions that feed the assumption and perception about the political 'other'; those who are different from the middle- and upper-class white male. Neo-colonialism or new colonialism then, is a process of

power concerning the continued influence the former colonial master has over their former colonies socio-economic activity and development. Having burnt down our houses, they used the political device of 'aid' to re-enforce our position as victims and losers in the eyes of the world, while they display our stolen artefacts in trophy cabinets called museums re-enforcing their narrative of superiority.

Neo-colonialism can be described as the subtle propagation of socio-economic and political activity by former colonial rulers aimed at reinforcing capitalism, neo-liberal globalization, and cultural subjugation of their former colonies. (Taiwo 2019)

It is no wonder that real diversity, regarding cultural difference, is under threat; when it is the hegemonic overlords that determine the criteria for global decision making. Acceptance is only assumed, when we have reframed and abandoned our ancestral frames of spatial practice; when we accept that their priorities will always put us at the back of the bus. Safiya Umoja Noble highlights a key challenge when trying to address the prejudice with regards to the criteria for selecting search results, which is that, in the construction of any digitised algorithmic decision-making platform, the key point is to understand that all initial mathematical formulations that drive automated decision-making are made by human beings who exist in a specific socio-cultural context. If the enlightenment assumptions, which abjected and ignored the rights of the 'other' and their ancestral frames, are still in-place as a global norm, then there will always be subconscious bias. According to Noble:

While we often think of terms such as "big data" and "algorithms" as being benign, neutral, all objective, they are anything but. The people who make these decisions hold all types of values, many of which openly promotes racism, sexism, and false notions of meritocracy, which is well documented in studies of Silicon Valley and other tech corridors. (2018: 1)

The conclusion at this point, is that the current international neo-liberal frame for global development, concerning digital algorithms, has emerged from an age

of reason that was not designed for women, enslaved or colonised people. Even with the best attempts to adjust and modify these systems, the accommodation of successful protests from the emancipation of women, enslaved people, civil rights and the post-colonial aftermath of de-colonisation, has meant that new algorithms will still harbour the residue of inherent prejudice.

An African Production of Space

These neoliberalist assumptions, underpinned by Western Enlightenment traditions, have been responsible for the production of the immersive spaces in most cityscape environment around the world architecturally and digitally. Henri Lefebvre's book *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre 1994), challenges out dated assumption surrounding 'space'; re-evaluating, with particular reference to the State, the role the 'individual' and 'society' has in the construction of space. He philosophically and technically deconstructs the Western Enlightenment traditions in the light of contemporary thought, which no longer separates the production of 'lived spaces' from political economy and cultural practice. He argues that social space is a social product, which by its nature is intertextual. There are three main definitions to his theory;

- Spatial practice,
- Representations of space and
- Representational spaces.

Briefly then; Spatial practice is linked to the daily routines within society. Representations of space identifies the symbiotic correlation between what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived. Representational spaces occur as a result of cultural and sub-cultural groups seeking to symbolise their shared social life (Lefebvre 1994).

Spatial practice

This can be seen as an activity that is closely linked to the daily routines of percipients and the social networks they create within their society. The key focus is continuity with a certain amount of cohesion. The use of the term percipient to define an individual in this context, is important here as the assumption is, percipients will be familiar with the practice and its location, by the repetition of their activity.

Representations of space

This identifies the symbiotic correlation between what is lived and perceived with what is conceived (Lefebvre 1994). This is where we make models that articulate the architectonics of a social environment. This is where we impose a particular knowledge frame in order to organise the construction of space. According to Lefebvre when we create representations of space, we do this through the conceptualised arts of a

Scientist, planners, urbanist, technocratic subdividers and social engineers.
(1994: 38)

Representational spaces

This occurs as a result of cultural and sub-cultural groups seeking to symbolise their shared social life. As a result, they will embody complex symbolisms as a way to represent identity and belonging. Although, with certain exceptions, these tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs.

Space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of “inhabitants” and “users”. (Lefebvre 1994: 39)

How we, as Africans in Africa and the African diaspora, perceive and conceive of our lived spaces, has in the last century been framed by either the Abrahamic religions, Capitalism or Communism; all of which, do not adequately represent the plethora of Afrocentric metaphysics that governed pre-colonial societies in Sub-Saharan Africa. This makes African conceptions of lived spaces essentially invisible, as we struggle to imagine a fictitious and literal future. Resistance to this subjugation, can be seen with the rise of Afro-futurism, which was and is a reaction to the lack of an African future in main-stream science fiction. Before Marvel's Black Panther, in all the major science fiction movies, Africa, as a continent, did not really exist in any of these futures. Our knowledge has been successfully banished to the prisons of western museums, forever disconnected from its origins and prevented from creating its own version of spatial practice in the future. Africans that do exist in these futures, have been successfully assimilated into a future conception that reinforces a Westernised

hegemony. Their presence, in these futures, is as a tolerated token intended to maintain racial diversity, suggesting that only enculturated Africans can exist in these futures. It is important, at this juncture to point out and define the origins of the term Afrofuturism, which was first coined by author Mark Dery. It appeared in his essay written in 1993, 'Black to the Future', he wrote about his observation of the African American's dilemma and difficulty of drawing on a past in order to project a future where African Americans could control the story of their roots and becoming. He suggests that African American are, in a sense descended from alien abductees and that their experience already embodied a sci-fi nightmare. According to Dery:

The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history imagine possible futures? (1994: 180)

Afrofuturism has since gained in significance as a cultural aesthetic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of history that explores the developing intersection of the cultures inherent in Africa and the African Diaspora with contemporary technology. It combines elements of: Science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, Afrocentrism and magic realism with non-Western cosmologies in order to critique present-day dilemmas of African people from Africa and the African Diaspora by interrogating and re-examining historical events. However, these ideas and aspirations can be detected as early as the 1920s in the Harlem renaissance, with writers like Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois who argued for a new ethnic consciousness by actively researching and expressing ethnic pride.

To conclude at this point, the models that articulates the architectonics of Westernised social environments, imposed particular knowledge frames in order to organise the construction and production of space; which was never initially designed for women, enslaved and colonised people to be free. It is no wonder that racial profiling persists as unconscious bias in our institutions. They are embedded in the DNA of its construction during Europe's age of reason.

Racial profiling

The question, whether racial profiling is another way of saying racial stereotyping, reveals a complex dilemma when trying to prevent institutional racism. If algorithms are facilitating decisions based on cultural profiling, how do we mitigate against this unconscious bias, which will only deepen the bias in the decision-making process with potentially disastrous results. In the past the 'other' would have to contend with librarians and teachers who assume a euro-centric perspective with regards to knowledge, but now with algorithms using big data, these perspectives have been compounded; as Noble has intimated below, prejudicial algorithms are set to be the norm:

What I discovered through my research is that algorithms are now doing the curatorial work that human beings like librarians or teachers used to do. When I initially came up with the title, back in 2012, the word 'algorithm' wasn't used the way it's used today. It wasn't in the headlines; journalists weren't really talking about algorithms. Fast forward to 2018, and my mother-in-law is talking about algorithms. Now everybody understands the word. (2019)

This has: Biological, psychological, sociological, pedagogical and ergonomic implications concerning the role of human effort in the formation and implementation of smart digitised city environments; which, has radically dislocated and disembodied percipients from any ecological imperatives that may have become more prescient, if viewed from different cultural narratives with reference to the 'other'. The voice of the 'other', is so eloquently expressed by Greta Thunberg's campaign for drastic action, in trying an overt a climate disaster; to rebel against our current levels of extinction, concerning bio-diversity and I would add, ethnic-diversity. Issues to do with embodied knowledge and lived space underpins how immersive spaces construct parameters that effect the expression of: Narratives, choices, ethical concerns, racial profiling, the differently abled and gender. It affects how the telling of untold cultural narratives, concerning the construction of physical and virtual environments, can alter the paradigms and pretext underpinning perspectives of

being and becoming in these new social contexts. New simulations technologies are colonizing our lived spaces, promising a form of digital utopia, where we can change the illusion of reality. The cultural expectations of VR and AR, regarding the purchase of an apparent utopian event, experienced in the moment, conflicts paradoxically with the cultural ideologies of capitalism. By this I mean, it has the desire to create dissatisfaction, shortly after the moment of experiencing a product, in order to fuel the need for more consumption; therefore, maximising the continued profit margins of companies that operate within these dominant paradigms of rampant consumerism.

Olu Taiwo Lectures in Physical theatre and Performing at the University of Winchester. He has a background in Art, Street performance, African percussion and martial arts. He has performed nationally and internationally promoting concepts surrounding practice as research, including how practice explores relationships between 'effort', and 'performative actions'.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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