5-2020

Racial-spatial politics: Policing Black citizens in white spaces and a 21st-century uprising

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JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ETHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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Policing Black citizens in white spaces and a 21st-century uprising

I had been at the library for hours, going over the last edits on my first book (Boyles 2015), when I received a distressing phone call: a police officer had killed a Black male teenager in the city of Ferguson. The caller said protesters were assembling at the scene and suggested that I go there immediately. Well, I responded accordingly. I went, ultimately embarking on an unanticipated, extraordinary three-year empirical journey. As a sociologist and critical criminologist, I had been researching and writing about conflict between Black citizens and police in the suburbs of the St. Louis region for five years. The book I was finalizing was an ethnographic study of Black resident–police relationships in Meacham Park, a historically Black neighborhood in the city of Kirkwood—one of St. Louis's most exclusive, predominantly white suburbs. In 1991 Meacham Park was annexed by Kirkwood, in what local Black residents described as a land grab. This, together with decades-long racial tensions and inequalities between the two communities, formed the backdrop to two separate shootings, in 2005 and 2008, in which two Black residents killed white police officers and others. The killings shook the region and subjected the residents of Meacham Park to heightened surveillance and harassment. My research extended traditional examinations of racialized policing in urban spaces to examine Black residents' experiences of policing in suburban locations, such as Ferguson, and how the protests against it form one prong of a larger antiviolence movement in the region.

Because Black citizens cross urban boundaries, their experiences with the police are not limited to the inner city. This necessitates critical analyses of the suburbs—especially analyses that uniquely unpack the traditional suburban milieu by accounting for antiurban sentiments and discourse (Low 2001), Black geographies (McKittrick and Woods 2007), and the social control of Black people (Alves 2018), the poor especially. If we attend to the everyday, differential experiences of Black people living in St. Louis suburban municipalities, particularly Kirkwood and Ferguson, the region's long-standing racial-spatial segregation and containment emerge as the nexus for criminalization, suburban political-economic marginalization, and an unexpected 21st-century Black uprising.

Why the suburbs matter: White spatial imagination and the invisibility of Black experiences

Most research on Black lives and policing focuses on urban spaces. In the US imagination, Blackness is often synonymous with the inner city and its stereotypical social ills—poverty, disorder, crime, dilapidated infrastructure, and vacant homes. Contrarily, the suburbs have been constructed, both in the popular imagination and in actual development, as white spaces characterized by middle-class values and aspirations. They are idealized places of order, safety, and the American way of life. The social and economic advancement of Black and brown people has been spatialized as a movement toward the suburbs, while the racialization of place informs policing practices. Consequently, racialized or differential policing may also be understood through the policing of place, which, owing to residential segregation, translates to the policing of race by location.

Black places are contained and generally policed aggressively through so-called proactive measures, while white places are generally policed reactively—by invitation and in voluntary and friendly interactions. But when Black folks reside in or pass through suburban spaces (assumed to be white), police are more aggressive, as is the case in Ferguson and Meacham Park/Kirkwood. The "race-and-place effect" posits that closeness to white domains marks Blacks as more susceptible to increased police scrutiny than those in urban settings or predominantly Black locations (Meehan and Ponder 2002). Take Meacham Park: it is geographically boxed in, having only one road in and out. In my research, Meacham Park residents overwhelmingly reported being routinely harassed by police at the

AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST, Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 150–154, ISSN 0094-0496, online ISSN 1548-1425. DOI: 10.1111/amet.12891

A crowd pauses for prayers at the memorial where Brown was killed in front of Canfield Green Apartments, August 30, 2014. (Emanuele Berry / St. Louis Public Radio and University of Missouri–St. Louis)

entrance/exit to "Kirkwood Proper," the affluent, predominantly white part of the suburb. As in the case of Ferguson, Black residents or passersby were disproportionately scrutinized and criminalized. Their safety and well-being were jeopardized by their movement into or through this suburban location—a place that advanced racially exploitative agendas initiated and supported by the then mostly white local government.

Kirkwood and Ferguson are structurally connected, most famously by the acclaimed Kirkwood-Ferguson streetcar (City of Ferguson, n.d.). The train line spanned the region, from south (Kirkwood) to north (Ferguson), embodying predominantly white governments and strategies that increased municipal revenue at the expense of local poor Black citizens. The killings in Kirkwood/Meacham Park (2005, 2008) and Ferguson (2014) are successive case studies. They reveal old assumptions about inhabiting space at the intersection of race, place, and suburban policing. These precarious arrangements and interactions deserve attention, because they exist in other largely unknown locations that one might not suspect to be sites of resistance.

The racial geography of the St. Louis region is much more complicated than the stereotypical binary oppositions of Black-white and city-suburb. There are pockets of disadvantaged Black citizens living in suburban unincorporated communities and municipalities throughout the region. Some of this is partly because Section 8 housing vouchers were extended across city lines (not without resistance) and because white flight continued, not only from the "city" but also from middle-class suburban neighborhoods to gentrified urban locations or further-out suburbs. There is also a long history of Black neighborhoods holding on to community and property against white efforts to establish racial exclusivity, as in Meacham Park and Webster Groves (Gordon 2008), University City and Richmond Heights (Cambria et al. 2018), and Clayton (Riley 2017). Contemporary Ferguson is a consequence of white flight and Black isolation. In 1970, Ferguson was 99 percent white; by 2010, it was about 30 percent white and 70 percent Black (Rothstein 2014). In the past, it was known as a "sundown town," or an all-white community that maintained segregation through discriminatory laws, violence, and public intimidation, a place where Black folks were kept out unless they were workers (Wright 2000). Today, Ferguson has a commonly acknowledged, well-defined, and disadvantaged Black side of town. Canfield Green, where Michael Brown was killed, is a stigmatized apartment complex (Jan 2018). It sits adjacent to and is the main entry point for a clustered group of low-income, Section 8 housing communities (S. Moore 2016). This is Ferguson's segregated Black neighborhood. None of this is by chance.

People living in the often-overlooked Black places in predominantly white suburban spaces experience social-economic isolation and systemic disinvestment. They are cordoned off; consequently, over time, they come to take on the stereotypical characteristics of the "inner city," reinforcing conflations of physical disorder with social disorder and legitimizing aggressive police surveillance and the

criminalization of entire populations (Boyles 2015, 2018, 2019). The everyday lives of white residents, however, remain undisturbed. They do not need to cross racial-spatial borders into Black places. In the white spatial imagination, Black places remain "over there" in the "city." Black residents are not neighbors, nor even proximate Others. Ignorance is white racial bliss.

Many were therefore stunned by "Ferguson." "Ferguson" was "unheard of," a foreign place. When we overlook the suburbs, we reify segregation as simple division: Black and white, city and suburb. We overlook the border patrols and violence that reinforce experiences of the suburbs as supposedly white. We ignore the suburbs at Black and brown folks' peril.

Canfield Green apartments—day one

Shortly after Brown's killing, I drove up to the intersection of Canfield Drive and West Florissant Boulevard. I saw a growing crowd of community members and media held back by police, yellow crime scene tape, and an armored police vehicle with an officer standing atop it with a high-powered rifle (Boyles 2019). This was the outer crime scene, about two and a half blocks from where the shooting occurred. It was not my first time at a homicide scene in St. Louis, but this was different. The presence of the militarized police antagonized the crowd, who saw their presence as a blatant attempt to intimidate the community, disregarding the death and loss of a young resident. In just a few hours, it seemed that a hard line had formed between the police and Black residents. This was a microcosm of the suburban policing I had been researching, unfolding before my eyes.

The murdered young man was Michael "Mike" Brown Jr. From where I was, I could not see Brown's body, but others in the crowd said he was still lying in the street. Amid the growing tension, we waited for answers and for Brown's body to be carefully removed. Brown's mother made her way from the inner crime scene in the Canfield Green Apartment complex to the crowd at the intersection of West Florissant and Canfield. We saw her raw pain and agitation. We held hands and formed a circle around her, prayed, and offered hugs and condolences. When the police had finally removed Brown's body and taken down the crime scene tape, we accompanied Brown's mother and some of his other family members back to the scene of Brown's death, where we prayed again, sang hymns, watched her lay rose petals where he once lay, and heard words of inspiration. This was the beginning of his first, widely visited and photographed memorial, in the middle of the street (Boyles 2019).

A temporary truce seemed to have settled, and at nightfall, eight to nine hours after the shooting, people were standing around, talking, and debating the day's events. Then a single cop car entered the apartment complex. The truce was broken. The crowd surrounded the car. Moments

In the foreground, a public memorial on the street where Mike Brown died on August 10, 2014, the day after his death. In the background, mourners gather in prayer. (Zun Lee)

later countless police cars with sirens blaring and lights flashing raced in from the opposite direction. It was as if someone had flipped a switch and all hell was about to break loose. They rushed through the crowd and destroyed the memorial (Boyles 2019). Some people just lost it. Then, to make matters worse, the police brought dogs out on us. My immediate thoughts were "Oh wow, now they got dogs? Are they getting ready to sick these dogs on us? Is this what my ancestors felt and went through? Are they about to do us the same way?" The history of slave patrols and the use of dogs to intimidate and attack enslaved Blacks, and their use again during the civil rights movement in the 1960s, became all too real. This was an increasingly unpredictable show of force. I was beyond stunned. This volatile night would be the first of many in the months to come.

Brown's killing and the police reaction to Black protesters are but further incidents in the long and continuing legacy of the anti-Blackness that birthed this nation, a white nation. In this regard, I am thinking about the film *Birth of a Nation*, the most profitable film of its day (Pfeiffer and Lehr 2020), and the more recent phenomenon of "birtherism" or "birther movement" (Smith and Tau 2011), a manufactured political conspiracy to malign our nation's first Black president. In what manner did *Birth of a Nation* reinvigorate white supremacy and the Klu Klux Klan? How has the more recent birtherism ideologically rebirthed a white nation? Is Brown's killing a modern lynching? These persisting "birth" efforts through popular culture not only renew racial threat (Smith and Holmes 2003), fear, suspicion, and hate but also justify the continuing racial segregation, containment, and aggressive, militarized policing of Black citizens. I am also thinking about how the protests that erupted after Brown's killing are also part of a legacy of Black resistance to racialized state violence.

To protect and serve ourselves

A striking feature of the Ferguson uprising, as well as subsequent actions since then, has been the formation of care communities during the protests. In tense confrontations between protesters and riot police, I have seen protesters pulling each other back and trying to calm each other down. They care for each other and try to protect themselves from the police. Throughout the uprising, I kept thinking it would take nothing more than one person—police or protester—to act impulsively and for this night to end in another tragedy. I relied on the camaraderie of the protesters around me for protection. These groups of mostly Black citizens, despite being strangers, protected and served one another proactively and spontaneously. The first night of the Ferguson protests concluded without major incident. Only the next day would the world see smoke-filled streets with mostly Black citizens facing tear gas and rubber bullets from police—as if in a war-torn country.

My second book, *You Can't Stop the Revolution* (Boyles 2019), is an ethnography based on my experiences as a participant-observer in direct action during and after the Ferguson uprising. I take up the question of how Black people protect themselves from police violence and from the social disorder and poverty resulting from decades of neglect and disinvestment. My findings belie accusations by conservative pundits and casual observers that Black people don't care about themselves, a sentiment captured by the media's familiar refrain "Black-on-Black crime." In academic circles, this is mirrored in the significant attention given to explaining the absence or lack of organization or internal social controls in disadvantaged communities.

After the first few months of direct action, the Ferguson protests themselves became like a neighborhood, a support system, a fictive kinship. Within the protest community there developed familiarity and comfort—emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbolic system (McMillan and Chavis 1986). These forms of solidarity have always existed; they are ongoing, "still here." They have advanced neighborhood participation and even community activism beyond the protests. The movement grew tentacles. People from all walks of life returned to their respective places—local and distant—with renewed conviction, purpose, and strategies, many of which morphed into other callings and more organizing, national and international activist platforms, and political careers.

As I write this piece, we are now approaching the sixth anniversary of the Ferguson uprising, and there have been more racialized murders of Black citizens. This is "post-Ferguson America" (Boyles 2019). In thinking retrospectively about the Ferguson uprising, we should not reduce racialized exchanges to events that occur only through the law or by law enforcement. Black citizens in the region, and throughout the nation, have *always* been subject to racial-spatial regulation as policy (legislation), with police as state-sanctioned reinforcement. More directly, the racial and political-economic vulnerabilities and exploitation of Black citizens remain the basis for social control and progressing 21st-century Black resistance. Thus, Black organizing and mobilizing persist in St. Louis; the work sets contemporary precedent, challenging the very root of not just racial segregation but the deliberate and enduring racial isolation that has marginalized the Black community and put it under heavy surveillance.

In carrying out this resistance, Black citizens rely on social ties for centering one another's lives through everyday reciprocity, both individually (informal integration) and collectively (formal participation) (Boyles 2019). Direct action remains prevalent in the region. From protesting in the streets to community forums and town hall meetings, Black citizens are vocal and working expansively to

groom leaders and counter neighborhood crime, school discrimination, and systemically subversive acts that target staunch local Black elected officials. This has taken place despite waning national and international interest and coverage, and the typecasting of Black Lives Matter discourse as superficial, temporary, and concerned only with law enforcement. Black resiliency, ingenuity, and efforts are all-encompassing, constants, and enduring. They always have been, and since 2014 particularly, movement work throughout the St. Louis region has continued to lead and command deeply spirited, transformative, and revolutionary commitments across all Black communities.

Acknowledgments. I extend thanks to Shanti Parikh for inviting me to contribute to this very timely, needed journal forum. I also appreciate her and Jong Bum Kwon's assistance and patience with my initial revisions. I am especially grateful to the Black St. Louisan participants in my projects, and the many community members, organizers, and leaders who selflessly give of themselves, daily, for the sake of advancing Black lives. I thank God.

Father and son standing in front of "America Wake Up!" spray-painted on a beam left from a fire set after the grand jury's decision not to indict Officer Wilson, December 2014. The building used to house the Beauty Town store on West Florissant Avenue in Ferguson. (Zun Lee)