

My research interests focus on how black people interpret and perform their racial identity, the processes by which they create community based on these understandings, and the significance of place and space in shaping these sentiments. The bulk of my research employs ethnographic methods to uncover what blacks think constitutes an “authentic” racial identity, how they signal this to others in everyday interaction, and how racially exclusive places shape understandings and performances of race. I am also interested in how race and gender identities interact. My interest in the intersection of race, space, gender, and culture underlies my book (under contract, *University of Chicago Press*), which centers on a black barbershop in Brooklyn, and my new research on black beauty salons.

The Black Community & Barbershop

It is common to hear people reference “the black community” in academia, the media, political discourse, and everyday conversations. Social scientists have demonstrated that all communities are imagined in a sense. Nevertheless, invoking the idea of a black community produces tangible effects (e.g. vote or protest). But does a recognizable black community exist in America today? If so, what appearance and form does it take? Is blackness the sole determinant of membership? How is social solidarity along the lines of blackness created, maintained, and policed?

I began to address these questions by analyzing black and white people’s general sentiments about racial solidarity as expressed in a nationally representative dataset. In a paper being prepared for publication, “A Quantitative Measure of Black and White Differences in the Perception of Community,” I use data from the General Social Survey 2000-2010 (GSS), to test the idea that racial status alone is enough to generate a sense of closeness for black people. I also test whether blacks report a heightened sense of racial relatedness compared to whites. I find that, even after controlling for mediators of racial solidarity such as class, sex, age, religion, and region, both of the aforementioned hypotheses are supported. In other words, I find some statistical evidence that blacks do imagine themselves as part of a community, even in the absence of personal acquaintanceship. This study also demonstrated that people who are marked by race (non-whites) in the U.S. are more likely than whites to consciously think about their race in their everyday lives. These findings beg the question: How do blacks achieve racial solidarity in everyday life? Is an imagined black community premised largely on phenotype, or on a presumption of shared experiences and understandings? Where can one find social manifestations of a black community?

These questions, which cannot be easily answered through surveys, motivated my dissertation, now a book manuscript in progress, “Shaping Community: Black Men in the Barbershop,” an ethnography of a black barbershop in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York. I chose to focus on an institution that is historically recognized as being significant to “the black community,” the barbershop, to examine how the people who gather there talk about race and about what creates a sense of racial relatedness between them. My book offers an empirical study of how black men who gather in a barbershop think about and enact their racial and gender identity. I also illustrate how the barbershop, as a pre-designated racial and gender exclusive place, structures these performances.

Shaping Community is based on three years of participant observation and dozens of interviews

with patrons and barbers, including the owners of surrounding barbershops (to get a more comprehensive picture of the role of black barbershops in the social life of the neighborhood). My book argues that blackness and racial relatedness are a situated interactional achievement, and that places like the barbershop become moral spaces that invoke and shape racial performances. Using W.E.B. Du Bois' classic concept of the double consciousness, I illustrate how black men perceive their beliefs, values, and practices in relation and in opposition to whites. I also show how they use the barbershop as a "racial backstage" to work on issues of individual and collective black identities in the absence of white scrutiny. Specifically, I find that the men use talk that identifies whites as the (often morally inferior) "other," self-critique, storytelling, and mentorship to construct their values and culture as distinctly "black." And I show how the barbershop facilitates the men's efforts to discuss, affirm, and police what they say constitutes an authentic black male identity.

Future Research: The Black Beauty Salon

I became interested in the topic of the beauty salon while conducting my dissertation fieldwork. My personal experience with being a patron in a black beauty salon for over twenty-five years helped me realize how the racial performances I witnessed in the barbershop were distinctly masculine ones. In order to analyze gender differences in racial performance, I have begun an ethnography of a comparable black beauty salon.