Race, Place, and Narrative

Abstract

Analyzing narratives or stories is a compelling way of examining racial exclusion, particularly in an age of post-racial common sense. The stories we tell about ourselves often invoke racialized violence and displacement. I use my research with octogenarian Jews in the Bronx to demonstrate this process, examining how they use the concept of neighborhood change to ground their identity. Drawing inspiration from James Baldwin, I argue that representing people as complicated in our stories is important to social change. I conclude this essay by complicating the role neighborhood change plays in my research subjects' stories, leaving space for new kinds of narratives and identities to develop.

Introduction

I am afraid that career social scientists are a strange bunch. I am confident that folks who spend a long time in the academy develop anxieties atypical of most 'normal,' people. You've probably had professors (as we are known to our students), both that you have hated, because of their inability to speak to your situation, and loved, because their interesting perspective made you understand your own life in a new and exciting way. As a group we straddle the line between genius and insanity. This tension makes our ideas interesting, and hopefully useful.

One of these anxieties, particularly pertaining to critical social scientists, has to do with connecting the small processes to the big ones, intimate scales like the body, to global scales like capitalism. How do our everyday routines, passions, habits, and repetitive motions link up to large far

reaching processes like globalization, slavery, and racism? What is our role, both at the individual and group scales, in both reproducing and changing these processes? A good example of this tension or anxiety would be debates around 'think globally, act locally.' Unpacking this statement would require an edited volume onto itself!

Although scholars such as Anthony Giddens, Henri Lefebvre, and Christian Anderson have passionately explored the nature of this connection, I think it is safe to say that we have not definitively figured out how, and in what ways, these kind of processes connect to each other (Giddens 1984, Lefebvre 1991, Anderson 2012). As you may have noticed in your studies, or simply by browsing this edited volume, the inability to give a final answer or ultimate truth to questions of a social nature is part and parcel of intellectual pursuit, making it a very exhausting process. The best forms of scholarship don't conclusively answer the questions they ask. Rather, they open up new and interesting questions, to be argued and contested over by future studies. Scholarship is a reflection on the world we live in, incredibly complex and indeterminate.

Reading this volume, I am sure you have captured some of this anxiety about connecting small and large processes. If you are like me, you are probably upset that racial exclusion is being reproduced at an alarming rate. Racial segregation, perhaps the most concrete proof that racism continues to exist, is as relevant now as it was when Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton wrote *American Apartheid* 20 years ago (Massey and Denton 1993).

In light of these developments, we have a lot of thinking to do about how racial exclusion is reproduced, and what we can do to change it. In this paper, I will try to persuade you that analyzing narratives or stories is a compelling way of examining racial exclusion. I hope that by rubbing together the conceptual stones of race, storytelling, and geography, I can create a spark, one that will reveal more interesting questions about racial exclusion, and quell some of this anxiety that we are experiencing.

A Post-Racial Society?

In this volume, we are interested in showing how racial injustice, specifically in the form of spatial exclusion, has persisted in a post-racial age. Saying we live in a post-racial age seems like a contradiction, particularly in light of this book. You may be asking, how can we live in a post-racial age when our lived experiences are still very much racialized? How are we beyond race, when we still group people into racial categories and our life outcomes are still determined by its effects?

Post-racial as I am using it in this chapter characterizes the way race is currently understood and talked about in the United States by policy makers, popular culture, mainstream media, and real people like your boss, classmate, and mother. Clearly race hasn't always been post-racial, and there is a large literature explaining how and why race has changed over time (Omi and Winant 1994). The idea that race is mutating, both in the way it is talked about and experienced in everyday life, has become popular in many social science circles. Looking into the past, social scientists will often talk about different periods of racial common sense, or how people generally understand race in a given historical time and place. Referring to the current moment in the United States as post-racial is an attempt to capture the metamorphosis of race, simultaneously looking at past trajectories, and hypothesizing about what direction it will head towards in the future.

The dawn of the post-racial age is marked by the election of Barack Obama as the President of the United States. Although many of the ideas about race that correspond to 'post-racial,' were in circulation before Obama's presidency, his election is a watershed moment for this new way of understanding race. Since then, the analytical power of race as a conceptual framework for understanding issues such as poverty, politics, and culture has dimmed or been removed from several important arenas (Wise 2010, Bonilla-Silva 2014).

A second trajectory of the post-racial age, a trend I believe that has intensified in the last few years, has been the partial integration or co-option of leftist critiques of race, specifically by institutions

responsible for creating and controlling racial discourses. This movement, which parallels the selective use of civil rights reforms by the U.S. State in the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's, has been specifically targeted towards race talk and representations. Overtly racialized speech and representations, and even in some cases, coded racist speech, have been contested and even removed from talk about race in public discourse.

Perhaps a current example will shed light on this issue. In January of 2014, Seattle Seahawks cornerback Richard Sherman, an American football player, was thrust into the national spotlight following a post-game interview during a playoff win over the division rival San Francisco 49ers. Erin Andrews, the interviewer, asked him about the game clinching play, a pass he broke up intended for Michael Crabtree, a wide receiver for the 49ers. He responded in an inflammatory manner, directing his fervor at Crabtree, "I'm the best corner in the game. When you try me with a sorry receiver like Crabtree that's the result you gonna (sic) get. Don't you ever talk about me."[i]

As a video of him making these comments went viral, many wondered about how an angry young black man with prominent dreads would be represented by the media. Would he be labeled a socially deviant thug and a symbol of poor racialized behavior? What followed was an intense moment of racial anxiety on the national scale that revealed what race looks and sounds like in a post-racial world.

Although a small minority of the twitterverse labeled him as a thug, thus forging a link between race, culture, bad behavior, and criminality, most of the sports media came to Sherman's defense. Not unlike another African American Football player, Jonathan Martin, who left the National Football League after allegedly being bullied by his teammates, Sherman was well educated and had a stable family life. Sherman's representation as a black thug was pinned to a few aberrant individuals, persons who were out of touch with or ignorant of current racial common sense. As Sherman quickly changed his tone in the days following the initial interview, he intelligently talked back to accusations of his thug like nature, further cementing his representation as a gentleman in the eyes of the nation. If you

thought he was a thug because of the way he looked and sounded, you were guilty in the court of public opinion.

This overwhelming attempt to defend Sherman and shunt aside any connections between his behavior and his race, produced a number of Straw Man critiques aimed at caricatures of racists who assumed every black man who looked, talked, and moved in the way Sherman did was a criminal. For example, Andrew Sharp, an author from *Grantland*, a sports and entertainment website associated with ESPN, whose parent company is Disney, wrote a faux article, satirizing attempts to connect Sherman's style, athleticism, and appearance with a negative valuation based on his race.[ii]

Instead of having a candid conversation about the role race played in the controversy surrounding Sherman's interview, and further, how race continues to matter in deciding the life outcomes of racialized groups in the United States, the nation as a whole, largely avoided the issue. Even critiques of Sherman's behavior pointed towards his poor sportsmanship, and away from any links between culture, style, and race.

Moreover, a popular meme comparing pop star Justine Bieber's (white) recent criminal activity, to Sherman (black) recent interview affectively decriminalized Sherman, begging its readers to dis-attach blackness with a state of criminality.[iii] Bieber is the thug, not Sherman. We are trained to think Sherman is a criminal because of his race, but in reality, Bieber is the misfit, the threat to us all.

In some ways the national reaction to Richard Sherman's interview shows progress, especially in light of struggles over racial representation in sports in the last 30 to 40 years. Often criticized and recently retired NBA commissioner David Stern sought to change a national perception that his league was too black for White America (Hughes 2004, McDonald and Toglia 2010). It is rumored, that one of his first actions as commissioner was to ban the 1985 'Showtime,' Lakers from using 'low fives,' during warm ups, reasoning that it was alienating to white viewers. He also implemented a controversial dress code that prevented players from dressing in a Hip Hop style. Currently, the National Football League has been at the center of battles over racist representation as the owner of the Redskins, Daniel Snyder,

refuses to change the name of his franchise, arguing that the Redskins symbol is, "a badge of honor."[iv]

The Sherman case demonstrates that we have become more knowledgeable about tacit assumptions between criminality and blackness. We have become more aware of what constitutes racism, particularly in the realm of representation. This awareness or consciousness however, has not as of yet, greatly decreased the number of young men of color going to jail. It has also not ameliorated the kinds of institutional racism that foster inequality in a multitude or arenas such as Health or Environmental Justice. The murder of Trayvon Martin and continued issues with police brutality and Stop and Frisk policies, particularly in large cities, has ignited critiques of this post-racial ideal.

It is my belief that it is quite impossible to address the outcomes of racist practices without talking about them. Race still exists, and it needs to be discussed. Like any good idea or scholarship, the meaning of race needs to be contested, questioned, and argued over. Avoiding race related talk or foisting charges of racism upon a few aberrant individuals does nothing for my social science anxiety, as it does not effectively connect the smaller processes to the big ones. Racial exclusion still exists, and our everyday connection to its reproduction remains unclear in a post-racial common sense.

I introduce storytelling analysis in this chapter to consider these issues. I suggest that the stories we tell about ourselves, who we are, and where we come from, are heavily racialized. These stories have the potential both to reproduce racial exclusion and to loosen the moorings on which it is fixed, particularly in a post-racial age. Examining the way we insert race into our stories is not the answer to ending racial exclusion, but it provides a set of useful analytical tools that may be used to critically examine and reposition how we understand race and its importance.

About Narrative, Race and Geography

A mentor of mine, Ruthie Gilmore, has often remarked that stories about 'us,' specifically how 'we the people,' came into being, requires a spatial and social unification, a moment in time that links

the past to the present. Americans weren't always American. In a series of historical occurrences, told in narrative form, 'American,' is forged, both as a people and a place. These stories about the origin of 'us,' require a tale of victory or triumph, often culminating with an act of violence and the dislocation or displacement of another people.[v]

The birth of America involves telling a story with several important plot developments or moments, including the 'discovery,' of Hispaniola by Christopher Columbus and the genocide of indigenous groups by various Europeans interests. This tale gains geographic specificity in the United States as Manhattan Island is 'sold,' to the Dutch for trinkets and U.S. leaders like Andrew Jackson violently defeat and forcibly dislocate indigenous people. The Trail of Tears for example, a death march in which indigenous people were forced to move from their ancestral homelands in the Southern United States to areas west of the Mississippi River, is an important part of the story that makes America and Americans possible. The transformation of captive Africans into slaves is also part of this narrative. The way we tell the spatial tale of American History requires the forced movement or violent defeat of racialized non-Americans.

Manifest Destiny is also a significant part of this story, which not only required the displacement of indigenous people, but several wars, most notably the Mexican-American War, in which a large portion of the land west of the Mississippi became territory of the United States. Mexico was vanquished and the continental United States were born. Thus, the story of America as a people and a place requires violence, appropriation, and displacement. 'We,' came into being by displacing and 'othering' other culturally-racial groups.

Looking at the urban scale, stories about the defeat and displacement of racialized others are also relevant. A great example of this phenomenon is featured in gentrification narratives constructed by real estate interests, developers, and politicians (Smith 1996). Neil Smith's analysis of gentrification on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1980's tells a story that uses colonial tropes about barren and unused land to position gentrifiers as pioneers or adventurers taking risks to tame and conquer

racialized others.

Just as people who have the power to control narratives about the past use stories to articulate who they are, telling a story racialized displacement can also be a rich source for identity formation. In this chapter, I will use examples from my own research that describe how stories about neighborhood change or urban displacement can be used to construct racialized identity. The stories people tell about their displacement from urban neighborhoods will show a) How race is used in stories to create group identity and b) How space or geography is often used to articulate race without directly referring to racial groups.

I will analyze the stories that I collected from Jews who moved from the West Bronx to Riverdale, which is also located in the Bronx, New York (See Figure 1). From the 1930's through the 1960's, the West Bronx was a middle to upper class Jewish neighborhood. Living on the Grand Concourse, the major thoroughfare that runs through the West Bronx, which is elevated above surrounding streets, was a status symbol. This boulevard is known for art deco buildings constructed in the early parts of the 20th century. As subway lines extended to this area, Jews migrated to the West Bronx from places like the Lower East Side, Harlem, and other parts of the Bronx. In the 1940's and 1950's the Bronx was almost 50 percent Jewish. During this time the West Bronx was two thirds Jewish (Rosenblum 2009).

Then, in a short period of time, from the late 1950's to the early 1980's, Jews migrated out of the West Bronx in large numbers. 123,000 Jews left the West Bronx between 1957 and 1980 (Ritterband and Cohen 1981). One of the places they moved to was Riverdale, located in the Northwestern part of the Bronx.

I conducted my research with Octogenarian Jews at a senior center in Riverdale. Over a year and a half, I debated politics, posed as a model for drawing classes, and handed out government mandated milk. I also conducted 30 interviews. These interviews are the main source of the stories or

narratives I will be analyzing.

Examining Stories for Racial Exclusion

My analysis of these stories meets at the intersection of race, identity, and geography. As a geographer who practices qualitative methods such as ethnography, I collect data, conduct analysis, and draw insights from observing people practicing every day routines. I also interview people, asking them directed questions about issues I am interested in. In these interviews I often ask people about the places where they have lived. While implementing this method, also known as residential histories, I listen carefully to what they say about geography. What emerges is a narrative structured by a hierarchy of places. Some are nicer, cleaner, and safer than others. Why is this? How do people organize geography at the neighborhood, city, and country scales? In the case of my research, I am interested in how people organize racialized geographies or the way people attach race to place.

This link between race and place, the way people articulate their own spatial pasts, where they have lived, and how they understand the spatial world they live in, reveals their identity, which group they belong to, where they set boundaries for inclusion, both socially and spatially, and how they identify 'others,' who are not part of their group.

In a post-racial age, one in which speakers not only avoid race because they believe its significance has declined, but also, because they fear being labeled as racist, race is often hidden inside space (Cresswell 1996). One of the ways in which space is commonly used to conceal race is through urban planning language, where the city is understood as the body or 'the body politic.' To function properly, the organism's body, the city, must be kept clean or sanitary, it's health depending on its homogeneity. Difference in the form of racialized groups is seen as a disease invading the city, a threat to its wellbeing (Anderson 1991). To prevent the body from becoming sick, racialized groups, who are

often represented through social pathologies such as poverty, prostitution, and drug use, must be quarantined, cleaned, or purged. More concretely, racialized groups, seen as a cancer on this 'body politic,' are subject to segregation, surveillance by police, gentrification, and urban renewal.

While these metaphors, organized around binaries of chaos and order, have been used for over 100 years to understand race on the urban scale, their significance has increased in light of the post-racial moment I discussed earlier. Recently, a phone app called 'Ghetto Tracker,' was created to navigate users away from what the creators called "unsafe," neighborhoods. After critics argued that ghetto was a racist term, the app changed its name to, "the good part of town."[vi] Despite the name change, the app accomplishes its intended goal, spatially identifying poor racialized neighborhoods. The name, "good part of town," implies white, safety, and order, while the bad part of town, references the opposite. The app is not called the white part of town, and it doesn't need to be, a reference to space conceals its racialized content. My research subjects linked race and space in this way to tell stories about who they were, where they lived, and how they got there.

Neighborhood Change

At this senior center, I interviewed people who had moved from Jewish neighborhoods in the West Bronx to Riverdale in the 1960's and 1970's. When I asked them why they had moved, their most common response was that the neighborhood had changed. My participants did not feel like neighborhood change was a concept that needed explaining. By virtue of being at this senior center, engaging in research about the Bronx, and being a New Yorker, they assumed that I knew exactly what neighborhood change was. Neighborhood change was a shared experience, a means for creating a group identity grounded in displacement. Neighborhood change played a very important role in their migration histories, providing an explanation of why they had left the West Bronx.

Playing the role of research investigator, I pressed them to elaborate. What exactly did neighborhood change mean? Explaining this concept, my participants were careful not to directly refer to the influx of African Americans and Puerto Ricans into their neighborhoods. Instead they talked about the link between place, behavior, and cleanliness to describe why they had left the West Bronx. What was going on in the streets? Was it safe? Clean?

Ruth for example said, "Well… ya know, I mean, its peoples' attitudes. They say, that's not my street. I could throw things here. I mean I was at the bus stop a few weeks ago. He had a container of coffee. He was waiting for the bus. The trash can was close and he just threw it on the floor"[vii]

Continuing after a pause she sharply said, "It's also upbringing. If there is no trashcan you hold onto it. I don't know if it was poverty or where they came from, but that was their way. I just don't know. No pride! They have no pride!"

Ruth's story about trash shows how my participants used values and behaviors as a proxy to talk about race. She racialized (un)cleanliness in space through links to bad parenting, negative attitudes, and a lack of pride. Ruth effectively drew boundaries between herself, a representative of middle class Jews in the Bronx, and racialized behaviors, which in her estimation, led the Bronx to be, "a dirty place."

Within the framework of neighborhood change, my participants consistently asserted themselves by racializing the built environment, ultimately tying their identities to cleanliness and neighborhood health. In this respect, blackness, black space, and black culture became disorderly, chaotic, and (un)clean. In discussions about the spaces they once lived in, they revealed a story about how and where they came to be. This story revolved around remembrances about changing landscapes, such as the street.

Bernice for example, made a link between race, space, and cleanliness when talking about the neighborhood she used to live in. When I asked her about what had changed in the Bronx

over her life time, she said with disdain, “It’s very bad. The streets are filthy. The temple near where I used to live is now a church.” She continued,

> “I remember when I moved to Grand Avenue. My parents still lived in my old neighborhood. I had a baby and it was late so I slept over and they were tossing bottles in the street and screaming. I thought what happened here? The whole place has changed. It was noisy and filthy.”

For Bernice, neighborhood change was defined through chaos and disorderly behavior in space. She mapped noise and filth onto racial bodies. The space created by these behaviors arose in the absence of white, or in this case, Jewish leadership and control. Like many other participants, Bernice understood the West Bronx as harmonious or orderly before the arrival of black folks. Jewish-white values and behaviors were the negation of deterioration, chaos, and disorder. Black and brown bodies represented noise and filth. Her story about why she had moved, and what happened to her neighborhood, invoked a discourse of change, which was racialized along tropes of “noise and filth.”

My participants used talk about public places like the street to discuss racial hierarchy. To describe what happened to the neighborhoods they lived in, and by extension, why they had moved, and what they had become post-migration, they talked about space in a racialized way. Hierarchally racializing and valuing different places, they were able to articulate their identities through tropes of displacement without using direct references to racialized groups. Their stories were powerful tools for inscribing a shared racial identity that helped reproduce racial exclusion.

Stories Can Also be an Intervention for Alternative Racial Identities

Narratives are an effective strategy for locating how race is discussed in a post-racial age. The need to create a racialized identity is an important part of our stories, who we are, and where we come from. My participants told the spatial story of 'us,' by invoking a discourse of neighborhood change.

My analysis of their stories leaves me at somewhat of an impasse. If neighborhood change as a way of racializing and valuing place is so important to my participants' identity, how can we imagine social change through narratives or story telling? What would happen if I told my participants that their stories were wrong or racist? It would be terribly disrespectful, make me an unethical scholar and an all around bad guy. Perhaps, most importantly, it would do little to change their minds. It wouldn't help us link the small processes to the big ones. It wouldn't help us be good anti-racists.

As students, scholars, and professional academics, not unlike novelists, we create characters in our research. We represent people through our speech and writing. We are not journalists. We are not here to record the facts. Our job is to problematize these facts, complicate them, and critique the narratives or stories that link them together. We do not analyze or use quotes out of their context because they fit into normative ideas about human life. Instead, we become comfortable with stories our audience may not be familiar with. Being a critical scholar requires problematizing the narratives we tell about our research.

Communicating our research to a broad audience and making ethical considerations about representing our research subjects, while focusing on social and political change is a tall order. How do we simultaneously accomplish these goals? African American novelist James Baldwin guides my thoughts in this regard. He is an inspiration to me, and his writing, both fiction and non-fiction, sits at the space-time of my research, Black and Jewish New York in the mid-twentieth century.

Baldwin identifies the role of the novelist similar to the way I have portrayed the critical scholar. He is wary of stories and characters that neatly fit into well defined social roles such as black or man. In Notes of a Native Son, a collection of non-fiction essays he published in 1955 primarily

about race, Baldwin reveals a politics for representation for authors of fiction. (Baldwin 1955). In an essay with the same title as the book, Baldwin criticizes both Uncle Tom's Cabin and Native Son, both critically acclaimed novels at the time of their release, for narrowly conceiving the African American experience in the United States. Baldwin critiques the former for the whiteness bestowed onto Uncle Tom, and the latter for the lack of depth given to its main character, Bigger Thomas. Baldwin sees these characters as paper thin, lacking the substance of real human beings. For Baldwin, the humanity of these characters, their complexity, is lost in what he calls the protest model of writing. He is reluctant to sacrifice the humanity of his characters for a story that overtly tries to make a political point.

Expanding on these ideas, Baldwin reveals the nature of humans or humanity, "He is not, after all, merely, a member of a Society of a Group or a deplorable conundrum to be explained by Science. He is - and how old fashioned the words sound – something more than that, something resolutely indefinable, unpredictable. In overlooking, denying, evading his complexity which is nothing more the disquieting complexity of ourselves - we are diminished – and we perish, only within the web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves" (Baldwin 1955 p.).

The kinds of struggles and contradictions that constitute humanity are a central part of Baldwin's narrative telling strategy. The last part of this quote, "only in ambiguity can we find ourselves and the power to free us from ourselves," demonstrates Baldwin's belief that we ought to be serious about the political implications of representation. His trenchant critiques of white society and American History in his novels are informed by these politics.

Baldwin's theories about representation and social change can be used to analyze the role neighborhood change plays in forging a racialized identity. Are there alternative ways we can employ my participants' sense of historical geography to tell a story that does not hinge on racial differentiation? Instead of referring to them as racists, what happens when we represent them as complex human beings? What are the uncertainties and continuity errors in their stories? What and

where are the outliers? Which places have been omitted in the story and why?

In the course of our discussions, my participants would often reveal other explanations for leaving the West Bronx, some of which contradicted earlier claims about racialized dirt, noise, and safety. Although, displacement was still a key process in the story of 'us,' the way it unfolded, particularly in regards to the relationship between race and place, destabilized neighborhood change as a strategy for forging group identity.

It was often in fits of passion and frustration that my participants complicated their stories in regards to neighborhood change. My participants and I re-imagined their departure from the West Bronx by discussing New York City's financial crisis[viii] and the role landlords played in Jewish displacement.

Shirley's residential history demonstrated this process. Talking about why the Bronx had changed, she said, "I really feel that it was the government. That no one paid attention. No one cared. They thought, who cares it's the Bronx." After explaining to her how the outer boroughs had been deliberately disinvested in by the city through a racist process called planned shrinkage, she replied, "Yeah, I know. It didn't have to happen that way with the burnt out buildings. Stuff like that. None of it had to happen, and I guess I don't know if I could have personally done anything. I guess I could have but I didn't. I didn't do anything. I didn't fight and stay. I don't know."

Shirley complicated the way in which my participants used neighborhood change to tell their residential histories. Reaching an impasse about why her neighborhood changed, Shirley embraced an ambiguous relationship between race, disinvestment, the government, and burned out buildings.

Shirley's understanding of Jewish culpability in the disinvestment process was inconsistent with the way neighborhood change organized the Bronx's racialized geographies. In many cases, my participants pinned the displacement process on people of color. Presumably, if they had not moved into the West Bronx, Jews would not have out-migrated to Riverdale. My participants' identities were tied to the idea that Jews were passive victims of black/brown values, behaviors, and culture. Black

culture transformed spaces from safe and orderly to dangerous and chaotic. In this excerpt, Shirley took responsibility for what happened in her neighborhood and imagined how Jews and other racialized groups could have worked together to curtail disinvestment. She complicated the hard geographic boundaries drawn around Jews and people of color in the Bronx, opening up new possibilities for understanding the displacement process. This ambiguity about the past presents opportunities to tell new stories about displacement, and envision identities that are not grounded in racial differentiation.

Similarly, Abe challenged the logic of neighborhood change when he highlighted the institutional mechanisms responsible for the displacement of Jews from the West Bronx. Undermining the idea that black and brown people "ruined," the West Bronx, he forged a link between disinvestment and the actions of landlords. Abe explained that a combination of rent controls and opportunistic landlords caused the rapid out migration of Jews from the West Bronx. Rent control laws in the Post-War period had made it profitable for landlords to rapidly turnover buildings. Raises in rent could only occur if longtime residents moved out. Unfortunately for landlords, residents often had no desire to leave. Abe told me that the most effective way to facilitate this process was to bust blocks on racial grounds.[ix]

Abe's narrative about Jewish displacement from the West Bronx revealed several tensions in his racial identity. Instead of highlighting the negative behaviors and values black and brown people exhibited in his neighborhood, he placed the legacy of urban disinvestment and Jewish displacement on rent control laws and landlords. In this moment, the racialized geography of the Bronx was temporarily rearranged. The racialized geography of neighborhood change that segregated the Bronx into human and sub-human broke down. Black folks were no longer the same as disinvestment. Abe believed that disinvestment could not be reduced to racial categories. The disinvestment process negatively affected both black and white folks. On several occasions, the dialogue between the seniors and I was transformative. I believe that our interactions helped shape their understanding of the Bronx's

racialized geography. It was often by pointing out contradictions in their narratives that we achieved breakthroughs.

Conclusion

To conclude, I come back to my original premise, critical scholars are strange people with unusual anxieties. We are continually trying to re-imagine the world as we know it, and further, understand the connections between everyday life and abstract processes. In this edited volume we are trying to figure out how racial exclusion is reproduced in a post-racial age. In this chapter, I suggest that analyzing the geographical stories we tell about ourselves is a useful analytical technique to understand how racial exclusion is reproduced in a post-racial world, particularly at the intimate scale of identity and conversation. In these stories, which often center on violence and displacement, we connect place and race to distinguish between 'us,' from 'them,' often in a way that does not directly refer to race. I use the social and spatial category of American as well as narratives around gentrification to make this point, emphasizing that the displacement process can be a rich source of identity formation at the urban scale. This kind of analysis is particularly important in a post-racial moment, characterized by the selective incorporations of leftist critiques into racial common sense, and the declining use of race to understand the social world.

In my research with Octogenerian Jews, who moved from the West Bronx to Riverdale in the 1960's and 1970's, I found that neighborhood change played a significant role in their residential histories. Neighborhood change explained how and why my participants were displaced from the West Bronx. Neighborhood change was a racially coded way of turning black and brown people into diseases that 'ruined,' or 'killed,' the neighborhoods they loved. People of color turned clean, safe, and nice neighborhoods into dirty, dangerous, bad places. This racial transformation was explained through the changing qualities of place. In these stories, my participants used a racial hierarchy of places to

simultaneously create group identity and to emphasize the importance of race, often without actually referring to racialized groups.

Frustrated that my analysis of race, identity, and place produced little hope for social change, I draw inspiration from James Baldwin, suggesting that we ought to think critically about how we represent people in the stories we tell about our research. The complexity and contradictions that make up my participants' stories provide an alternative to neighborhood change, an opportunity to re-imagine group identity.

As an exercise in self-reflection, I encourage you to analyze your own story. Where is your family from? Do you draw your identity from some kind of displacement process? Are your ancestors immigrants to the United States? How is this story told and repeated by people who belong to the same group as you? Does it involve violence, in what way? Does race play an important role in this story? Is racialized meaning hidden inside your references to place? If you are a college student, why have you chose to live in one area, and not another? Are your concerns about cleanliness and safety racialized?

Perhaps, you are already familiar with the story your family tells abouy 'us,' and you are very critical of your identity as American, British, Brazilian, or Nigerian. In this case, I would challenge you to think about complexity and contradiction in these stories. What kinds of alternative identities can emerge through these stories? Perhaps we cannot change the past, but we can tell a different story about it, certainly about whom we are and how we came to be that way.

I am a part of the Bronx's Jewish diaspora. I grew up in the suburbs of New York City for most of my life. White flight, the movement of white folks from the city to the suburbs in the mid-late twentieth century, is often used to explain my family's trajectory. The perks of suburbanization such as owning a home, having a safe place for children to play, and access to superior schools are part of a narrative that claims suburbanization was inevitable, a consumption choice by urban out-migrants. As such, white flight is a story used to legitimize and explain the residential histories of Jews living in New York's suburbs.

My research has influenced my own understanding of who I am and where I came from. My research shows that the supposed upward and outward trajectory of suburbanization, which is grounded in the separation of blacks and Puerto Ricans from whites, wasn't always neat. Many of my study's participants had no desire to move to the suburbs. They were tied to the urban Jewish neighborhoods they inhabited in places like the West Bronx. These revelations provide an opportunity to rethink historical geography and its relationship to racialized identity.

In closing, critically examining and challenging the trajectories of our stories, both at the scale of a personal story and official history, is an important step in questioning and changing the reproduction of racial exclusion.

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Figures: Figure 1

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[i] The following is a link to the Richard Sherman's interview.
Becker, Jon. 2014. "Video: Seahawks' Richard Sherman Goes Off During Interview After Helping Beat 49ers." *San Jose Mercury News.* Online. Posted 1/19/2014. Accessed 2/24/2014. <http://www.mercurynews.com/cruises/ci_24945339/video-seahawks-richard-sherman-goes-off-during-tv>

[ii] #HotSportsTakes is a regular feature on *Grantland* that uses satire to critique popular or mainstream thinking on sports news. Here, the author suggests that Sherman shouldn't play in the Superbowl because of his behavior in this interview.
Sharp, Andrew. 2014. "#HotSportsTakes: Should Richard Sherman Be Playing in the Super Bowl." *Grantland.* Online Posted 1/22/2014. Accessed 2/24/2014. < http://grantland.com/the-triangle/hotsportstakes-should-richard-sherman-be-playing-in-the-super-bowl/>

[iii] The author of this meme is lifestyle blogger and romance novelist, Derrick Jaxn. This meme was
widely shared in social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter.
Jaxn, Derrick. @DerrickJaxn. Tweet. 1/23/2014. *Say Hello to Society.* https://twitter.com/DerrickJaxn. Last Accessed on 2/24/2014.

[iv] Daniel Snyder, the owner of the Redskins has been under increased pressure to change the name of his
team, drawing the ire of tv personalities like Bob Costas. Despite public pressure, he has not budged, pledging that he will not change the name of the team.
Associated Press. 2013. Redskings' Owner Snyder: NFL Team's Name is 'A Badge of Honor' Tells Season Ticket Holders That Name Change is Not Being Considered. *CBS New York Sports*. Online. Posted 10/9/2013. Accessed 2/24/2014.
<http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2013/10/09/redskins-owner-snyder-nfl-teams-name-is-a-badge-of-honor/>

[v] Howard Zinn follows this storytelling approach in *A People's History of the United States* (Zinn 1999).

[vi] A description of the 'Ghetto Tracker," app and name change.
O'Conner, Lydia. 2013. "'Ghetto Tracker,' App That Helps Rich Avoid Poor, Is as Bad as it Sounds." *Huffington Post*. Online. Posted 9/4/2013. Accessed 2/24/2014.
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/04/ghetto-tracker_n_3869051.html>

[vii] I use pseudonyms in reference to my research subjects

[viii] The reasons for urban disinvestment in the Bronx were complex. Both the state, and private interests withdrew capital and services from the outer boroughs of New York, particularly the Bronx. New York's fiscal crisis, which occurred in the mid 1970's coincided with a worldwide crisis in capitalism. The state appointed an emergency crisis committee to solve New York City's fiscal problems. This committee representedreal estate, insurance, and finance interests in Manhattan. Under new leadership, policies such as planned shrinkage were enacted, which actively sought to impoverish neighborhoods in the outer boroughs, like the Bronx. The Fire department was cut severely, even in the face of fires that consumed the Bronx during this time period (Greenberg 2008).

[ix] Blockbusting is the process by which real estate interests would use unsavory tactics to turn

over housing from white to black.