Black activity spaces in Shaker Heights

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ABSTRACT
The majority of Americans reside in suburbs and today’s suburbs are becoming more racially diverse than ever before. My research uses an ethnographic approach to investigate social life in one racially diverse suburb of Cleveland, Ohio: Shaker Heights. Specifically, I investigate how Black Americans who occupy this space—as residents, employees, and visitors—think about, describe, and participate in social life in a diverse suburb. I conclude that, although Shaker is statistically integrated, the activity spaces and social lives of Black adults do not reflect this demographic reality. The findings from this study will help researchers better understand dynamics of community life and race relations in suburbia; a neighborhood type that is both seldom explored and growing in demographic importance.

Introduction

Housing segregation in the United States has been especially pernicious for Black Americans. Historical mobility patterns, housing preferences, and racial discrimination have resulted in a uniquely American urban geography characterized by a concentration of poverty and joblessness in Black neighborhoods, the clustering of middle-class Black neighborhoods near poorer ones, and the isolation of Black neighborhoods near the inner-city (Charles, 2003; Massey & Denton, 1993; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). Today, a nationwide “diversity explosion” (W. Frey, 2015a) has created a novel residential outcome for all Americans but especially novel for Americans living in suburbs as an increasing share of people of color have suburbanized. It is a demographic shift of some historical significance that most Americans today, including Black Americans, now reside in suburbs.

Urbanists have been carefully analyzing this growing suburban diversity with an eye on how racial segregation will look in this changing residential form. In general, it seems that segregation can still occur in “diverse” neighborhoods. Ethnographic and interview studies of diverse or statistically integrated city neighborhoods suggest that social interactions remain segregated at the individual- and group-level (Berrey, 2015a; Burke, 2012; Mayorga-Gallo, 2014; Perry, 2017). In her acclaimed research Tatum (2017) demonstrated how segregated clusters form in community settings that we expect to be characterized by group-level interactions, like a school lunchroom. Demographic and quantitative analyses paint a similar picture. Many places experiencing growth in racial diversity also end up having, perhaps ironically, higher indices of segregation over time (Charles, 2003; Kye, 2018; Pinto-Coelho & Zuberi, 2015). Why does racial integration seem so elusive, even in places that are becoming more racially diverse?
Many social scientists agree that racial segregation is bad—for business, civic life, education, employment, to name only a few. However, we have yet to fully unpack what happens inside of segregated (and integrated) suburbs in terms of social interactions among adults. My central research question is: does neighborhood-level diversity lead to a diverse social life for Black suburbanites? I was also interested in finding out how Black suburbanites construct and maintain community-based social ties. These are some of the questions that led me to conduct an ethnography of Black social life in one of Ohio’s, perhaps the nation’s, most storied integrated suburban communities: Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Through interviews and participation in community life from 2016 to 2018, I learned that the Black people in Shaker Heights live, move, and shop in predominantly Black neighborhood spaces. Between-group interactions are not the default for Black residents and are even more fleeting for Black visitors. This is a paradox. How could a diverse residential suburb be characterized by so few diverse interactions among adults? In the following pages, I describe and attempt to explain the formation and function of predominantly Black activity spaces in Shaker Heights. The driving logic is that where you go, as much as where you live, is an important segregation variable—one that we may overlook with more traditional, static measures. For my purposes, I observed neighborhood settings to analyze activity spaces within Shaker Heights. and conducted interviews to better understand how Black adults make sense of segregation/integration in a reputedly diverse suburb.

Background

Despite the persistence of residential segregation in our nation’s cities, and the academic debates surrounding them, a somewhat optimistic forecast abounds: in many U.S. cities neighborhood integration (or diversity) is increasing (W. Frey, 2015a). The suburbanization of people of color, ethno-racial groups formerly excluded from suburbia, is driving much of this trend (Frey, 2011; Timberlake et al., 2011). The majority of Americans, regardless of race, live in suburbia. As suburbs become more diverse, can we expect that racial groups will have more exposure and interactions with each other? Researchers of neighborhood race relations may find useful insights from research on social life in what Frey (2011) calls “melting pot” suburbs—diverse suburbs with over 35% of nonwhite residents. Given the relative nascent of rising neighborhood (and especially suburban) diversity, there are some limitations to what we know about social life in these evolving multiracial neighborhood settings. Specifically, I argue that social scientists have yet to document and fully unpack what happens inside of suburbs in terms of social interactions and that there is a lack of contemporary qualitative research on the Black American suburban experience in the current urban studies literature.

Activity spaces and potential interaction networks

Urbanists who study segregated and integrated neighborhoods are beginning to research activity spaces with increased frequency (Browning et al., 2017; Jones & Pebley, 2014; Krivo et al., 2013; Schonfelder & Axhausen, 2003; Tuttle, 2020; Wong & Shaw, 2011). The concept of activity spaces moves us beyond traditional, static measures of segregation that capture primarily levels of evenness or dissimilarity (Wong & Shaw, 2011). Activity spaces are typically thought of as the total area of the locations where individual people spend their
time (Schonfelder & Axhausen, 2003; Wong & Shaw, 2011). That is, our activity space is the total spatial area of (neighborhood) settings we visit, sometimes including workplaces or other people’s houses. In terms of segregation or exposure, where we visit throughout the day is significant and impacts who we have the potential to interact with.

The total geographic area an individual travels is the typical measure of exposure to segregation or integration in activity spaces research. Wong and Shaw (2011) conceptualize activity spaces using places people visit as points; then, drawing lines connecting a sample of points an individual travels, they create polygons that represent total exposure area. This type of measure can tell us how people use and converge in space. In research on activity space, a common method is to select a sample of people (based on desired group characteristics like race) and track their individual movements across a metropolitan area.

Activity spaces can be a powerful conceptual tool to measure and understand segregation and neighborhood inequality by race. Krivo et al. (2013) conducted activity spaces research focused on racial inequality using a network analysis of data collected in Los Angeles (L.A. FANS). Krivo et al. (2013) were able to compare spatial activity of individuals who share the same home neighborhood. They found that “home neighborhood disadvantage is positively associated with disadvantage in individuals’ nonhome activity locations” (p. 159). This trend was especially pronounced for African Americans and Latinx Americans. In these studies, we can leverage measures of activity space in comparison to traditional measures like the index of dissimilarity, to see correlations between where we live and where we visit.

Activity spaces can also be measured qualitatively. I would argue that neighborhood ethnography has always been a measure of activity spaces. In some ethnographic case studies, researchers follow participants and, in a way, can log their activity space (Desmond, 2016). In many ethnographies, the focus is on neighborhood settings as a container for (potential) social interactions (Anderson, 2011; Berrey, 2015a; Burke, 2012; Mayorga-Gallo, 2014; Perry, 2017; Tuttle, 2020). Tuttle (2020) analyzes the ebbs and flows of activity—along with changing racial compositions—using participant observation and interviews. This approach samples neighborhood sites (e.g., bars), observes activity in those spaces at different times of day, and attempts to understand the structure of interactions, both observed and potentiated. I follow the Tuttle (2020) approach accepting that I am not measuring individual level activity spaces as a total exposure area. Rather I can describe, in depth, details of settings, people in them, and what people say about these settings as stops (or points) in the total area of their activity spaces.

**Suburban Black activity spaces and Black placemaking**

Lacy’s (2004, 2007) qualitative work on Black suburbanites stands out as the type of research needed in urban studies given the recent diversity explosion in U.S. suburbs. Lacy’s research provides important insights to suburban race relations broadly, and the Black suburban experience specifically. This line of research also informs much of our understanding of the Black middle class, including within-class variations, but there is still much work to be done on social interactions in suburban neighborhoods. For instance, we have yet to hear much from poor and working-class Black suburbanites. Black people living in suburbs are not all middle class or affluent. While the class diversity of Black suburbanites was explored in a historical case study by Haynes (2001) recent trends beg for contemporary analysis.
The research on revealed preferences for neighborhood integration suggest that Americans all value and practice different versions of diversity (Charles, 2003; Clark, 2009; Krysan, 2002; Oliver, 2010). According to Clark (2009), in general, “as income and education increase, the probability of choosing a more integrated residential setting also increases (p. 353).” However, Clark also found a unique preference for Black respondents for neighborhoods with at least 50% Black residents. This revealed “Black preference” was found to be true, in general, across income and education.

The Chocolate Cities framework, (Hunter & Robinson, 2018) and the related concept Black placemaking (Hunter et al., 2016), may be helpful for understanding what is happening inside of suburbs today. By historicizing and connecting Black peoples’ neighborhood mobility patterns, this theory suggests that Black places are made as a result of structural discrimination as well as agentic and collective action. According to sociologists Hunter and Robinson (2018), the migration histories of Black Americans resulted in the formation of nodes of Black communities sprawling the continental United States; from Harlem to DC, from Detroit to Memphis. Their plotted geography of these chocolate city nodes helps explain how Black Americans managed to unite as a collective and form a “nation within a nation.”

According to Hunter and Robinson (2018), “Black placemaking refers to the ability of residents to shift otherwise oppressive geographies of a city to provide sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics . . . placemaking is the simple idea that people ‘transform the places in which we find ourselves into places in which we live’ (p. 4–5). Black places do not emerge solely because they are involuntarily segregated; rather, they are made intentionally to meet Black peoples’ needs for joy, love, commiseration, community building, making art, and creative expression (Hunter et al., 2016). I argue that the logic of Black placemaking would extend to the suburbs given the history of Black exclusion in the suburbs and more recent suburbanization of Black people. While my analysis focuses on contemporary Black life in the suburb of Shaker Heights from 2016 to 2018, some brief historical background of racial integration (and exclusion) in Shaker Heights is needed to make this point.

A brief history of racial integration in Shaker Heights
Shaker Heights, Ohio, is one of the few suburban communities in the country where white and Black families have lived and learned side by side for over 50 years. The City of Shaker Heights, a suburb of Cleveland (Figure 1), has celebrated the accomplishment of (relative) racial integration for almost six decades. About 40% of diverse suburbs in the U.S. share the distinction of stable integration since 1980 according to estimates by sociologists Orfield and Luce (2013). According to the 2010 Census, Shaker Heights had a population of 28,448 and its racial composition was 54.96% White, 37.07% Black, 2.2% Hispanic, 4.59% Asian, and less than 1% American Indian. Although Shaker Heights continues to be majority white, the number of white residents has been declining as the number of residents of color increase. This seems to be a general trend in American suburbs (Kye, 2018).

In terms of the timing of integration, of both schools and the housing market, Shaker Heights is historically progressive. In terms of schooling, there are some unique features of the community that allowed Shaker to lead the charge for integration. Based on an agreement between developers and city leaders in the early 1900s, the school district boundaries extend a few blocks west of Shaker into Cleveland (Stokes-Hammond, 2011). In an informational meeting with a Shaker Heights’s Local History Librarian, I learned,
[Shaker has] this mismatch between the school district and the city district, but it meant that the housing values were lower in the Cleveland section which means they were more affordable. So, African American families who were professionals, teachers, librarians, dentists were moving out of central Cleveland to Mount Pleasant which is some of these near eastside neighborhoods. Then, from there, into the Shaker school district.

As upwardly mobile Black families moved to these urban neighborhoods on Cleveland’s east side, at first a slow trickle in the postwar years, Black students began entering Shaker schools. School integration was early, historically, but arguably unintended.\(^1\)

Black people becoming residents in Shaker Heights was also unintended. Prior to the progressive reputation it enjoys today, Shaker Heights was an exclusive community. Shaker Heights, like many suburban communities across the nation had racially restrictive covenants written into deeds, forbidding the sale of homes to Black and Jewish families (Morton, 2010). According to local history (Richter, 1999; Stokes-Hammond, 2011), the first Black homeowners settled in the south-western neighborhood of Ludlow in the 1950s (Figure 2).

Shaker’s progressive reputation in housing integration emerged from the, pre-Fair Housing Act, Ludlow “experiment” (Stokes-Hammond, 2011; Stuart Math Films, 1998). In Ludlow, and Moreland, there are stories of Black homeowners who had to use subversive means to gain access to homeownership in Shaker. One historian (Stokes-Hammond, 2011) describes instances where white allies would participate in the early stages of home-seeking and on the day of signing over the deed, the real buyers, who were Black, would show up. This created and unearthed racial tensions and on one occasion terrorism in the form of a house bombing. In the Ludlow neighborhood, in part a direct response to the local bombing, white residents joined with incoming Black neighbors in support of conflict-
free integration. Their designed policy initially involved an agreement to only sell a house to someone of your own race. This mostly organic policy began with the goal of crystallizing the neighborhood’s racial composition and preventing further turnover.

The efforts of Ludlow’s Community Association, and eventually the City of Shaker, were distinctly progressive in the 1950s (Keating, 1994; Richter, 1999; Stokes-Hammond, 2011). In retrospect, however, Shaker Heights was not so much pro-diversity as much as it was anti-white flight and anti-neighborhood turnover (Galster, 1990; Keating, 1994). Throughout the years, The City of Shaker Heights has maintained a goal of stabilizing integration. According to urban historian Dennis Keating (1994), Shaker Heights stands out as one of the few suburbs in the United States that “voluntarily adopted pro-integrative policies and maintained them” (p. 76). Throughout the years, The City of Shaker Heights has tried different approaches to maintain “integration” or prevent turnover. These historically unprecedented efforts—mostly focused in the initially integrated southwest neighborhoods of Ludlow and Moreland—included incentives to encourage white homeownership and patronage. Meanwhile, the city created or maintained standing disincentives for businesses that attract Black social life—ordinances forbidding bowling alleys and barbershops, for instance (Hart, 2003). Today, the city’s racial integration maintenance efforts are less direct but arguably still in operation.

While Shaker Heights has not undergone a dramatic demographic turnover—from a predominantly white to a predominantly Black suburb—the racial composition of some of the neighborhoods in Shaker have changed since the 1980s when Keating (1994) documented the successes of their integration efforts. The racial make-up of neighborhoods within Shaker are unlike the 1990s description found in Ogbu’s (2003) research turned book, or in Ng’s (2017) best-selling novel Little Fires Everywhere. The community has been well-documented, but it continues to change. Today, there are many places in Shaker where exposure to racially diverse social interactions is low.

In the last few decades, the Southwestern corner of Shaker has experienced the most racial turnover and white flight. This happens to be the side of Shaker that shares a border with the segregated Black neighborhoods on Cleveland’s eastside—neighborhoods that many current “Shakerites” have family and history in (Kusmer, 1978; Michney, 2017). This creates potential complications for a city that has always had a singular plan for race
relations in housing: maintain racial balance. In the 2 years of my fieldwork (described in more details below), the departments of Economic Development and Neighborhood Revitalization were extremely active in Moreland. For example, there are monthly community events sponsored by the city’s Neighborhood Revitalization initiative, “Moreland Rising.” Moreland Rising is intended to promote events that engage Shaker residents and bring entrepreneurs into Moreland. According to the website, Moreland Rising is the only neighborhood focused initiative of the Neighborhood Revitalization department. Like the historic racial balance in housing programs that made national headlines, the current “neighborhood revitalization” initiatives seem to be focused on the originally integrated (and contested) neighborhoods of Shaker.

**Data & methods**

This study was designed to analyze a ground-up view on neighborhood race relations. My central research question was: does diversity in a neighborhood lead to a diverse social life for Black Americans? I was also interested in finding out how Black suburbanites construct and maintain community-based social ties. To achieve this end, I moved to Shaker Heights in the summer of 2016 to conduct an ethnographic case study. Using ethnographic inquiry, I investigated Black people’s perceptions of community life in Shaker and documented their social behavior in public. My analysis is based on data from a combination of formal interviews (n = 33), informal conversations with over 100 people, and approximately 200 hours of observations of informal public life and formal gatherings. All interview respondents included in this sample and analysis self-identify as Black or African American. My findings suggest that Black social life occurs in spaces that are disproportionately Black compared to Shaker’s overall racial composition.

During my fieldwork, I observed public settings to measure activity spaces—and potential social interactions—among Black adults who live in (and some who visit) a reputedly diverse neighborhood. This research approaches the question of activity spaces in two ways. I asked respondents about the local places they visit. Sometimes I would verify these accounts after running into them in public. Additionally, I visited stores and public places throughout my two-year tenure in Shaker. During my time in the field, I asked Black people I met about their perceptions of racial diversity and about their social encounters and relationships inside and outside of Shaker Heights. I collected observational data on the social interactions I witnessed (and sometimes participated in) as well as on the racial composition of various neighborhood spaces. In both informal conversation and on the formal interview questionnaire, I was able to collect information on daily routines, encounters or relationships with others, and perceptions about racial diversity in Shaker Heights. I collected data on the spaces within Shaker that Black adults patronize, visit, and reside in. Through first-hand observation and interviews, I collected information about the social affiliations and places of employment, leisure, recreation, and residence for Black people in Shaker.

Shaker Heights has nine officially recognized neighborhoods (Figure 2) and, in the first months of fieldwork, I surveyed each of these communities to gather data on such features as the block layout, the racial composition of pedestrians (or visible residents), and the ratio of public to private space. This was done during my first summer in Shaker—first, by car and then, as I narrowed my focus, while on dog walks and bike rides. My survey of public
spaces led me to conclude that the majority of public and/or social settings—and potential interaction for adults—are clustered in the Moreland neighborhood. As a result, I began to focus more heavily on Moreland. Although I cannot easily quantify it, the overwhelming majority of my observations come from spending time in this part of town—at the public library where I worked part-time for 10 months between July 2016 and April 2017, shopping at the Lee-Chagrin Plaza, attending events for residents held at the Stephanie Tubbs Jones community building, and recharging in the coffee shop.\(^2\) I also frequented a Moreland restaurant and bar, A Touch of Italy and attended several community events at a business incubator called The Dealership (also in Moreland).

After spending about 3 months in the field (as a resident, employee, and visitor), I realized that there are many nonresident adults in the community—people who work in or visit Shaker regularly. The sample of places discussed below, were selected because they represent central themes that emerged in the analysis and because they represent settings that any adult could enter and, if they chose, stay for more than just passing time.\(^3\) The sample of adults analyzed here, shaped by this early finding, includes Black visitors, Black employees, and Black patrons—regardless if they are residents of Shaker. Specifically, formal interviews were conducted with 15 Black visitors and 18 Black residents. All people in the sample are adults.

The names of individuals that appear in this text are all pseudonyms. During the consent process for formal interviews, I gave participants the option to use their real name or a pseudonym. In the end, only three individuals elected for their real name to be omitted. One of these individuals told me that using a pseudonym was the only way they could speak honestly. For fear that using only a few real names would negate the use of pseudonyms for those who wished to remain anonymous, I elected to use pseudonyms throughout. In contrast, I use the real names of streets, stores, and other named entities described herein. Shaker Heights is a real place with a well-documented history, and I hope that in some way, even without the use of real names, my analysis and reporting may add to that history.

**Data analysis**

I analyzed the data from my interviews and observational field notes using systematic methods of coding and comparison. The themes that guided my inquiry were broad at the outset but followed an inductive logic ultimately narrowing the scope. With this approach, I identified conceptual categories as they emerged from field notes and interview transcripts, as well as from predetermined categories. I coded data iteratively throughout the collection process, enabling me to identify emergent research themes. My aim was to find the most salient patterns in the emergent themes and to determine their “social ground and import” (Geertz, 2001, p. 60) specifically in shaping the lived experience of Black people in Shaker Heights. I asked respondents about the local places they visit. Sometimes I would verify these accounts after running into them in a store or at an event. Additionally, I intentionally visited local stores and public places weekly throughout my 22-month tenure in Shaker. I took a note of the racial composition of visitors in each place I visited. Respondents would verify or correct
my firsthand observations in formal interviews and informal conversations. Formal interviews also included questions related to the themes of perceptions of diversity, neighborhood change, and housing mobility histories.

**Findings**

There are areas in Shaker that are not that diverse . . . [Shaker is diverse] as a whole, but there are still the pockets and there are still areas, like the Moreland community, that I feel today, and I’ve seen it happen over time, where the Moreland community is now considered the quote “Black area of Shaker.” So, even though we have white residents as well, but I guess it’s just the numbers.” (Val, long-time Moreland resident)

**Shaker Heights is integrated at the municipal level but not at the neighborhood level**

The presence of housing segregation is a factor that structures or influences potential interaction networks of people within Shaker Heights. Shortly after moving to Shaker, I learned that there is a predominantly Black part of town clustered in the southwestern corner of the suburb. The lack of integration within Shaker is noticeable when looking at census estimates (Figure 3). Using 2016 ACS 5-year estimates, a calculated index of dissimilarity of 0.49 suggests that, on average, tracts in Shaker Hts. are more segregated than one might expect from its reputation. A map of racial composition of tracts can tell us more about patterns at the neighborhood level. (Figure)

The predominantly Black areas of Shaker Heights, what I refer to as Black Shaker, includes the Moreland, Lomond, and Ludlow neighborhoods. Taking the average of 2016 estimates, for example, 74.03% of the residents living in “lower Shaker” were Black (Table 1). In Moreland, which covers two census tracts, this percentage is over 80%. In the adjacent neighborhood of Lomond, also comprising two census tracts, Black families are still in the majority (71% and 58%, respectively). This part of Shaker is disproportionately Black.

As Val’s quote above suggests, many residents also are aware of this demographic reality. Lisa, for instance, reported similar thoughts about Black Shaker. Lisa, a Black woman in her 50s, is a long-time resident of Shaker Heights. She is a former homeowner in the Lomond neighborhood. Lomond was where she bought her first suburban home, but it was only a few streets over from her former residence in a nearby neighborhood in Cleveland. When I met Lisa, she was recently divorced and living in a condominium in the Sussex neighborhood. “Shaker has its, it has it’s uh, neighborhoods within neighborhoods, trust me. If you on the right side of the tracks, you know, like if you go over in the . . . where the high school is located, up in that area you only find a lot of whites.” Newer residents also mentioned this pattern of segregation between the neighborhoods of Shaker, suggesting they are aware of this pattern of micro segregation in an integrated (at the aggregate-level) suburb.

Dee and James have lived in the Moreland neighborhood for almost a decade. They reside in a house located just south of Van Aken Boulevard. Van Aken is a main road with one of the two streetcar lines (or “Rapid”) in Shaker. Dee recalled that when she and her
Figure 3. Percent African American by neighborhood (census tract) in Shaker Heights, 2016 ACS 5-year estimates.
Table 1. Percent Black or African American alone in selected Shaker Heights, Cuyahoga County, Ohio Census Tracts.

| Year | Tract (Neighborhood) | 1834.02 (Ludlow/Moreland) | 1836.03 (Moreland) | 1836.04 (Lomond) | 1836.06 (Lomond) |
|------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|      | Percent               | Percent Margin of Error    | Percent           | Percent Margin of Error | Percent          | Percent Margin of Error |
| 2016 | 75.8%                 | ±9.8                      | 91.2%             | ±5.3             | 71.0%           | ±5.4             | 58.1%           | ±6.7             |
| 2018 | 74.0%                 | ±9.7                      | 88.3%             | ±5.1             | 66.0%           | ±6.5             | 51.6%           | ±8.3             |

Source: American Community Survey (ACS) 5 yr estimates.

husband purchased their home, they knew little about housing segregation patterns in Shaker. Dee told me that, shortly after moving in, though, she realized that they lived in the Black part of Shaker:

We literally live on the wrong side of the tracks! Our neighbors are mostly Black, there are more vacant lots, and more rental houses south of Van Aken. If you cross the tracks (on Van Aken), you will see the whiter, richer, and better-kept part of town.

Has “Black Shaker always existed”? 

Franklin Sr. (Frank), a former council member and current homeowner in the Moreland neighborhood, calls the Black part of Shaker Heights “lower Shaker.” Below is an excerpt from my interview with Frank where he discusses what he remembers of the racial composition of Shaker when he first arrived in the 1980s.

Me: What was Shaker like when you first moved [to Shaker] in ’84?

Frank: Shaker was a good, inclusive community on Menlo, which is a street we lived on, which I say is basically the first street in Shaker, Lower Shaker. We had many whites as well as Blacks that lived on the street. [My kids] had many white friends on the street as well as in the school. The former mayor, Judy Rawson, who then lived in what I call Upper Shaker, across from us . . . [She] would bring her son down to our neighborhood at that time to play with [my son], and [he] would go to their neighborhood to play as well.

In this conversation, Frank identified 1980s “lower Shaker” as a racially diverse neighborhood. Similarly, Val, whose quote appears in the section introduction, is an active community member and has been a resident since the early 1990s. Her mom and brother first moved to Shaker in the early 1980s and Val eventually followed them. She told me that her mom fell in love with the two-family homes in Moreland and her brother liked that Shaker was diverse and, specifically, that Moreland was “not a predominantly white area of Shaker.” Both long-time residents Frank and Val said that when they first moved to Shaker Moreland was more diverse (Black and white), but, over time, the neighborhood became predominantly Black.

Racial segregation at the neighborhood-level was one of the first things I noted in my observations and it was among the first answers shared in response to the question of “is Shaker a diverse neighborhood?” Again, residents seem to be acutely aware of this neighborhood-level segregation, both present-day patterns and the changes over time. For instance, Moreland was predominantly white in 1960, but Black residents
increased from 10% to 40% by 1970 and by 1980 African Americans were in the majority in Moreland (Hart, 2003). Today, close to 85% of residents living in Moreland are Black suggesting some combination of historical white flight, persistent white avoidance, and continued Black preference.

**Micro-segregation and potential interactions**

Although there are African American families living in all corners of Shaker Heights today, the southwestern corner of Shaker is no longer what segregation scholars would consider racially diverse. “Lower” Shaker is overwhelmingly home to Black residents. According to Eric, a Ludlow resident and active community member, “Shaker is like a gymnasium. Everyone is here, but they are sitting in different corners of the gym” (Figure 3).

Who is everyone? While residents may have a greater stake in neighborhood activities, they are not the only ones responsible for shaping the daily pulse of a community (Anderson, 2011; Duneier, 1999; Grasmuck, 2005). I argue that Census figures only give a snapshot of residential diversity. In addition to the residential demographics, however, Black Shaker is host to businesses and many city facilities (e.g., a shopping center, the main library, and a community building). The main commercial district and “downtown” are in lower Shaker, in the Moreland neighborhood. There are more than 30 businesses on the Lee Road-Chagrin Boulevard commercial corridor, a main thoroughfare that splits the Moreland and Lomond neighborhoods. The majority of employees, patrons, and visitors in this area are also Black.

Today, the predominantly Black areas like Moreland are popular destinations for Black businesses and Black visitors alike. In the different settings I visited, I was able to observe and talk to Black visitors, in addition to adult residents. I learned that many visitors are not residents of Shaker. Some of them live in adjacent suburbs, but even the closest visitor needed a car or bus to get to town. This raises the question, is where you live the most important factor shaping who you get to interact with? In other words, if people living in Black Shaker have mostly Black interactions, is that at all surprising from a structural perspective?

Theoretically, it makes sense to conclude that where we live shapes who we get the opportunity to talk to face-to-face—our potential interaction network. If that is true, it should also be true that the racial composition of your potential interaction network looks identical to your neighborhood demographics. The logical conclusion is that the network of people you can potentially interact with will be racially segregated/homogeneous if you live in a segregated place/a place with largely one race. For any of this to be true, we would need some evidence that on average people spend time near their homes and that on average others will do the same. If you have mostly Black neighbors, you should expect to see mostly other Black people when you leave your house. Many commercial and municipal spaces in Black Shaker border the less segregated neighborhoods, like Fernway (see Figure 3). I wondered why these settings, which ostensibly are open to the public, are segregated.

Does the presence of a segregated residential population also explain segregated public spaces? This is where the role of visitors (in interaction with residents) emerged as an important factor. I argue activity spaces is a useful empirical measure of residential
segregation. While I cannot measure where every individual Black resident went on their daily routine, the convergence of residents and visitors in various settings in Black Shaker allowed me to get a sense of who is choosing this part of Shaker Heights as a destination to shop, work, and socialize.

**Where you live vs. where you go**

From my observations and informal conversations with Black visitors in Shaker (including employees, entrepreneurs, and patrons), it seems that Black visitors are more likely to use spaces where Black people are in the majority. Some of the nonresidential activity spaces in Black Spaces include the computer lab in the Main Library and the Lee-Chagrin Shopping Plaza (which hosts a grocery store, four hair salons geared toward Black clients, a café, and a restaurant-bar). Apart from shoppers at the grocery store—which, at any time I visited, was between one third and one half white—I did not observe many non-Black people in these spaces. Although the grocery store was a weekly stop in my personal routines and ethnographic observations, it did not emerge as a setting of major significance.³

During my fieldwork, the relative absence of non-Black visitors was an important emergent finding. It suggested that non-Black people seldom frequent this part of town; further evidence that Shaker Heights is segregated at the neighborhood level, residentially and in terms of where residents and visitors spend their time. The commercial facilities and public institutions in Black Shaker bring many visitors to the neighborhood, such as employees, entrepreneurs, and patrons. If you shop in this part of town, you are likely to see only a few non-Black people. Black residents live here and Black people from outside of Shaker visit, by car or public transit, to work, socialize, and shop.

**The library computer lab**

The public library, in Moreland, stands out as a representative example of a segregated activity space. For ten months, between July 2016 and April 2017, I took a part-time job as a desk attendant in the Main Library’s computer lab located in the Moreland Neighborhood (see Figure 2). The public library, in Moreland, stands out as a representative example of segregation in nonresidential activity spaces. As Putnam and Feldstein (2003) write, “people may go to the library looking mainly for information, but they find each other there” (p. 49.). In the library in Shaker, Black visitors are unlikely to encounter a racially diverse group of “others.”

The library is in Shaker’s downtown—where the Fernway and Moreland neighborhoods meet—on a four-way intersection divided by a streetcar median. The library sits behind the Stephanie Tubbs Jones community building in a parking lot on a main intersection that hosts, on each of the respective corners, City Hall, a shopping center, and the Shaker Heights Police Department. The Library’s computer lab is a large room on the second floor of the Shaker Heights Public Library. A half-dozen 10-foot tall windows run along the walls. Giant shades pulled over the windows provide ample shade from the glaring summer sun with just enough natural light to balance the fluorescent-lit ceiling. The walls in the lab are the color of the Double Mint gum packaging. The bright, yet subtle, green is simultaneously energizing and calming. The dynamics of the computer lab share this quality.
In the main area there are 25 computers. The center aisle way splits up the room so that there are two computers next to each other at each desk. In the back of the room there are two printers and a Xerox machine. Behind the printing station, in an enclosed room, is the “training lab.” When not in use for class, the training lab has 12 additional computers available for public use.

For twenty hours per week, working in the computer lab, I was able to see some of the daily activity in the public library. There are ebbs and flows in activity and noisiness. The computer lab is quiet most of the time. After spending a few weeks working in the lab, I realized that the majority of patrons are “regulars.” If, on an average day, there are people sitting at all 37 computers in the lab, at least 20 seats are occupied by regulars. Over time, I was able to recognize their normal disposition—the average in the range of behavior I observed directly. For instance, there are twin brothers in their mid-20, “The Twins,” who came in almost every day. The Twins are busybodies, and often storm in and out of the lab in a fury, sometimes with their shirts halfway off, exposing their skinny but chiseled torsos. Sometimes The Twins only come in, quickly look around and leave—without ever sitting down to use a computer. Even when they sit at the computer desks, they fidget in their seats, they sing under their breath but loud enough to carry throughout the computer lab, and they chat with whoever happens to be sitting nearby.

With the exception of a group of five to six Black teen regulars, who typically arrived daily to play video games on the computers, the lab is an adult activity space. On an average day, there seems to be a pretty even distribution of people ages 15 to 30 and 30 to 45. There are some older adults, aged 45 to 60, and there are very few seniors (60+). A majority of the daily computer lab patrons are Black, the remaining non-Black visitors are mostly white. There are two Asian American men who regularly come to the computer lab—one man always tied his long hair back with a thin red tie and wore fingerless black leather gloves. My coworkers named him “Karate.” In general, the computer lab is a predominantly Black activity space.

One Monday night in the Main Library computer lab, I had a conversation with a regular visitor named Michelle. Michelle always wears her long locks tied up in colorful, African patterned wraps. I would describe Michelle as a long-term neighborhood visitor. Michelle comes to the lab weekly, if not daily, but she is not a resident of Shaker Heights. She told me she has been visiting the library for over 5 years. I asked Michelle if she lived close to Shaker, and she said “No. I live on Lakeshore [a street in Cleveland]. I used to live in Warreensville Heights [a neighboring suburb] but I moved.” I wondered why she spent so much time in Shaker—Lakeshore Boulevard is at least 25–30 minutes (19 miles) across town by car.

Me: “You come all the way to Shaker, just for the library?”

Michelle: “Yea. I like it here. Well, my son brings me here on his way to work. I live with my son.”

Me: “If you don’t mind me asking, why the Shaker library and not one closer—isn’t there a branch near Lake Shore?”

I learned that Michelle prefers the Shaker library because it is close to what she calls “home.” That is, the library is close to her friends and family who still live in Warreensville Heights. She also said that she feels a sense of community and belonging here. Michelle used to meet with a group of women weekly for a book club (their organization dissolved in 2016). I asked if her reading group was “predominantly Black.” Michelle said “yes,” and immediately upon describing her group, she looked around the room and noted that the
computer center, too, was a mostly Black space, “I guess I never paid it [the racial composition] that much attention.” Michelle’s experience is similar to that of other Black visitors I met—just because Shaker is diverse, does not mean a person will automatically experience that diversity when visiting the neighborhoods of Shaker.

I find that the neighborhood spaces that Black visitors use in Shaker, although not extremely diverse in terms of race, do provide increased exposure/proximity to Black people from a wide range of class backgrounds. For example, in the computer lab at the Main Library it is common to see Mike, a college professor, sitting and working next to Joel, a jobless millennial. Joe, a houseless man with holes in his tennis shoes, who is often the last person to leave, can often be found sitting next to Denise, a nationally renowned dancer and choreographer. A retired surgeon, who I call “Doc,” would come in regularly to check stocks and work on a business plan for a soda company. Doc, on any given day, may sit next to Nikki, a single mother of two who comes in to create and print fliers for her home-cleaning service. I do not argue that, in these moments, Mike and Joel or Denise and Joe become intimately acquainted. However, exposure to difference (or diversity) can happen on many fronts. In this snapshot of library computer lab users, racial diversity is low but socioeconomic diversity is high. Also, there is a noticeable blend of residents and visitors.

I observed similar dynamics in other neighborhood spaces in Black Shaker. In my participation in and observations of social life in Shaker Heights, I frequently encountered people from outside of Shaker coming to patronize the cafes, barbershops, and restaurants.

**A touch of Italy**

A Touch of Italy Bar and Grille sits on Chagrin Boulevard across the street from the Lee-Chagrin shopping plaza in downtown Shaker Heights. The shopping plaza also shares an intersection with the Main Library. On a snowy Friday in November, a few months into my fieldwork, I made plans to meet two friends, Patrick and Will, at A Touch of Italy. Patrick, in his late thirties, has been living at his parents’ house in the Lomond neighborhood for the last month. His parents live in the same house where Patrick was raised. He has not lived in Cleveland since he graduated from Shaker high school but recently returned home with his wife and his young daughter while they wait to relocate to Washington, D.C., for work. They used to live in Cincinnati. Patrick told me he has frequented this bar off and on since he was in college in the late 1990s–early 2000s. Will, who is one of Patrick’s best friends and former college roommate, also joined us. Will lives in a suburb of Cleveland, south of Shaker Heights, called Garfield Heights. Will is the one that suggested that we meet at A Touch of Italy.

The parking lot was mostly full at 9 p.m.—four open spaces, about 40 total. Stores in the shopping plaza shut down at 9 o’clock each night, so the parking lot across the street was mostly vacant. I arrived at Touch of Italy at 9 p.m. and sat in my car for several minutes waiting for Patrick and Will to arrive. I noticed an older Asian man walking to his car. And a Black couple around my age [28] walk into the bar. The Asian man was parked next to me on my left. On my right, an older Black woman in her fifties. The Asian man drove a Ford Taurus and the Black woman drove a Chrysler Sebring. There is a Hyundai Sonata another Chrysler Sebring, Ford explorer, Dodge Caliber, a Ford 500, all that seem to have been made between 2008 and 2012. With the exception of the one Asian man, all of the people that I saw in the parking lot were Black.

I was eager to get inside to see the layout of this place to get a better idea of the patrons that are in there and how they are using the space. I called Patrick to tell him I arrived. He stepped outside to smoke a cigar. He dapped me up and I asked him ‘how is it?’ He said, “it’s real hood in there. It’s
a different crowd.” He laughed. Will pulled up as we were talking, and we all went inside. When we walked in there was hip-hop music playing at a volume comfortable for speaking. There were about 30 people in the bar. Women slightly outnumbered the men. As far as age, I guessed the range to be between 30 and 60. It seems like a bar for a slightly older or mature crowd. Everyone inside the bar was Black.

As the evening went on, Patrick ran into a few old Shaker classmates and Will seemed to know a handful of people. One of them, Franklin, worked at “Touch” as a manager. Franklin was super cool—he bought us a round of drinks. Franklin is not a very large man, but he is solid—I found out later that he is a former high school football standout from Shaker Heights. I was so eager to connect with Franklin for my research, but I did not want to seem overzealous. I chatted with the guys and did my best to find common threads between me and Franklin. The conversation continued but Franklin walked away and made his rounds. He was walking around tending to his guests, popping back into the conversation in spurts. At one point, I lost track of both Franklin and Will. Patrick and I stepped outside to find Will in the back chatting with Franklin. Apparently, Will and Franklin have known each other all their lives and it showed. Patrick and I listened quietly while they were sharing stories and reminiscing about childhood. While the four of us stood outside, three couples came and left, and each person spoke to Franklin. Someone even yelled ‘hey Franklin!’ from a car in the parking lot. We stayed outside chatting for maybe 20 minutes before parting ways for the night. (Authors Fieldnote)

Will’s behavior that night and on subsequent visits, along with my observations at the Library, shaped my understanding of the behaviors and motivations of Black visitors. Will exemplifies someone who visits Black Shaker as a result of network ties to Black residents. Will is a long-time visitor to the Moreland bar-restaurant A Touch of Italy. The people who frequent the restaurant are both from Shaker and neighboring communities in Cleveland and surrounding suburbs. Most of the patrons are Black—the restaurant never had more than five non-Black patrons on any of my visits. It seems like a bar for an older, mature crowd (30+) but, based on my observations, it is a lively social space. Each time I visited, mainly in the evening, hip-hop music was playing loudly, but it did not deter patrons from mingling. One-half of the space is sit-down style dining, and the other half has a newly renovated bar with large flat screen TVs. If the Cleveland Cavaliers are playing, the joint is packed.

Will joins his family and friends for happy hour at A Touch of Italy several times a month. He told me that whenever he is in Shaker, A Touch of Italy is the place he frequents most often. During my time in the field, A Touch of Italy was managed by Shaker Heights resident Franklin Jr., who also happens to be Frank’s (mentioned earlier) son and one of Will’s oldest childhood friends. As shown in the excerpted fieldnote, I met Frank on the first time I was invited to hang out with Will. I visited Touch of Italy four more times to meet with Will, and each time he introduced me to new people. I visited on my own on at least 10 other occasions; and once as a part of a community engagement event in Moreland.

On a Tuesday night in March 2017, Will invited me to have drinks. When I arrived, he was sitting with his sister, brother-in-law, and one of his (other) best friends at the bar. His sister and brother-in-law were also visiting, they live south of Shaker in the Lee-Miles Cleveland neighborhood. His best friend, D-Man, is another Shaker resident and successful photographer in the Cleveland area. D-Man shared a story about a conversation he overheard during a recent gig at a political rally where two white Cleveland politicians were talking about a riot at a suburban mall (Beachwood, Ohio). In that conversation, he recalled the politicians referring to the Black teenagers involved in the riot as “animals.” As
a photographer and paid contractor, D-Man said he felt obligated to hold his tongue, but he was visibly angry when sharing the story with us. Will was angry too and queried, “That’s how they think of us?” while shaking his head. Will is typically a laid-back guy, but this evening he was visibly bothered by the depiction of Black teens as animals. He pursed his lips and shook his head and, referring to the riot at the local mall, he said “I mean … I don’t always like what we do but I don’t hate Black people.”

For 2 years, I hung out in heart of one of the country’s most reputedly diverse suburbs and in that experience, I found myself celebrating, commiserating, and living the Black experience with a mix of Black residents and Black visitors. Patrick and I, current (if temporary) residents, came to A Touch of Italy from around the corner here in Shaker. Some visitors, like Will and Michelle, will travel from across town to spend time in Shaker. Because Black activity spaces for adults overlap, they become sites for class diverse, within group (potential) interactions. In Black Shaker, that includes Black people from outside of the suburb who come in for a standard of service, treatment, and behavior that meets their expectations or preferences.

**Proximity, people, preferences: Black placemaking in suburban Shaker Heights**

While some Black residents and visitors had critiques about the Main Library or shops at the Lee-Chagrin Plaza, Black adults continue to move and feel comfortable in the predominantly Black spaces in Shaker. To unpack the experiences of Black adults living in Shaker, I rely on the conceptual framework of chocolate cities (Hunter & Robinson, 2018). In the last two decades, some people, including prominent Black journalists like Eugene Robinson (2010), have advanced an argument that Black people’s lives are too varied for “a Black experience” to be a useful analytical lens in the 21st century. Hunter and Robinson (2018) offered evidence challenging the notion that there is racial disintegration in the Black community. Instead, Hunter & Robinson showed that through a shared history of migration and an agentic effort in Black place making (Hunter et al., 2016), Black people’s experiences converge in uniquely American, yet diasporic (Clerge, 2019), and identifiably cultural and spatial ways. All of these convergences can be observed or measured. They exist despite ongoing and increasing variations in class, generation, neighborhood type or tenure, and across the diaspora of Black ethnicities (Clerge, 2019; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo, 1999, 2005).

Based on my interviews and observations, Black people with varying levels of socioeconomic status do not avoid other Black people in these shared neighborhood spaces. The convergence of Black residents and nonresidents represents a collective outcome shaped by three Ps: *proximity, people, and preferences*. The first P, *proximity*, or the spatial layout (segregation) of Black residents in Shaker cannot be ignored. I argue that geographic proximity is one of many explanations we should consider. Specifically, the tract-level segregation and the clustering of Black-run business in “lower Shaker” structures potential interaction networks by proximity.

Second, while proximity alone does not direct people to act, in Shaker, many Black residents and entrepreneurs are personally responsible for inviting some Black *people*—the second P—into the neighborhood. This individual action contributes to the critical mass of Black peoples in Black Shaker and intensifies the potential for interaction networks to also be Black. The third P, *preferences*, is represented in two ways. For one, the presence of Black people (and relative absence of non-Black people) *reveals* preferences (Clark, 2009).
Black people said that they use the shops and spaces in Moreland, for example, for the proximity and amenities. Black visitors, some invited in by other people in Shaker, can access desirable goods and services. They are even able to socialize in a space that feels safe and comfortable. Second, interview respondents expressed on several occasions that they do not fear or hate Black people. Both their statements in interviews and observed actions are demonstrative of this sentiment.

**Bridge-building as a revealed preference**

The role of residents inviting people into Shaker can be seen in story of resident Clarence and two entrepreneurs Langston and Dre. Clarence, a former chef and small-business owner, lives in a large house in the Fernway neighborhood (see Figure 2) with his wife, mother-in-law, college-aged daughter, and a nephew. His mother-in-law and his adult nephew did not grow up in Shaker but as current residents they are now members of the official community. Clarence and his wife are two upwardly mobile and highly educated entrepreneurs. Clarence’s relatives, who often visit when the former chef fires up the barbecue grill for a cookout, are “outsiders” or nonresident visitors. They are from Cleveland, where Clarence himself grew up and spent much of his adult life. Many Black residents, even those who lamented neighborhood change, use their current status and position as residents to invite others in their familial, professional, and other social networks into Shaker Heights as visitors.

Two Black entrepreneurs, Dre, a Moreland-area barber at “Studio Lofts,” and a local realtor, Langston, both described their client base as predominantly African American and predominantly nonresidents. Dre said that all the stylists at Studio Lofts are Black and 90% of their customers come from outside of Shaker Heights. Interestingly, Studio Lofts is a “chain” beauty salon. There are many Studio Loft locations throughout the Cleveland area, but the location in racially diverse Shaker is almost exclusively Black. Dre said he does not know how or why the shopping plaza became a predominantly Black space, but he is content with his location (representing all three Ps). Dre said, “This is always going to be a good place to do business.”

Langston, a regular at the library computer lab and the co-owner of one of Shaker’s oldest realty companies, echoed the same sentiment. In an interview, he told me that he and his family have been selling homes for over 40 years and primarily serve Black people. Langston said his real-estate business is not targeted to Black people, but “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” So, even though Langston is a widely accepted member of the business community in diverse Shaker Heights, he spends most of his time and resources helping Black people find homes outside (sometimes right on the border) of Shaker Heights. Many of these clients will in turn use community and commercial spaces in Black Shaker.

**Feelings of safety/stigma in Black spaces as a revealed preference**

In my interviews with adults and from my observations in the neighborhood, I learned that some people view Black Shaker, and specifically the library, as unsafe. During an interview, one Moreland resident, Dee, reported an incident when her son was in high school, and
a white classmate’s father refused to let the kids work on a class project at the main library. When I shared that story with Val, also a resident, she explained why some people are scared to send their kids to the library:

Because of things that have happened there. But, at the same time, you’ll hear the support of that Main Library by many of the white residents here, you know? They want that library there, but there have been things that happen there. Kids unsupervised. You know, just brawling. Those have happened in the library. It has happened. You know, so I understand those fears, but it’s not something that’s constant or continual.

During the year I worked in the computer center, I occasionally encountered people who behaved rudely toward myself or another member of the library staff. One instance occurred on my very first shift when I was sitting at the main desk with a coworker Mona and my supervisor Lori. Mona is a Black woman in her early 20s and a graduate of Shaker Heights High. Mona grew up in town but now lives in a neighboring suburb. Lori, a middle-aged white librarian, works in Shaker but lives in a nearby suburb. On a Tuesday night in June, a man in his late-20s was listening to his music at a distracting volume in the computer lab. He became instantly defensive, and eventually aggressive, when we asked him to lower the volume. Because he refused both a verbal and instant message chat requests to turn the music down, we shut off his computer remotely from our workstation and planned to call Library security to have him escorted out. I learned that this is the standard policy when someone has violated the computer lab policies. Pushing chairs, he stormed loudly out of the training lab yelling, “How y’all gon’ shut off my computer I was still working on that!” He stood at the staff desk with his arms to his side slightly curled and his fists balled tight. Lori told Mona to call 911 (in addition to security). Mona dialed the numbers, but this angered patron left before anything escalated. When I started working, I was worried that this kind of behavior would typify my daily encounters. The man who had an outburst, eventually returned (within two weeks) and, for the remainder of the year I worked in the computer lab, never gave us another problem. His outburst could quite reasonably have been “a bad day” and we might have pushed the wrong button.

An older Black woman, who needed my help to send a fax at the library, said she takes the transit line to come to the Shaker library even though the Harvey Rice Cleveland Library branch is only “a 7-minute walk” from her house. She said, “we’re deep in the hood and people act loud and inconsiderate at [Harvey Rice]. I don’t care if there are police officers.” She mainly complained that people talk loudly on their phones. To her, Shaker is a nice library—an upgrade from the one in the “hood.” To my coworker, Mona, the Computer Lab in Shaker fits the same description as the Harvey Rice branch. Mona said, “People say they like it here, but I don’t know why. It’s not quiet. Soon as you walk in the door it’s loud.” Compared to a university library, for example, it would be hard to describe the library in Shaker as quiet. The computer lab is livelier than the stacks of a research library. However, I did not observe incessant noise and I only witnessed a few aggressive outbursts like the one described above. As Val said, although disruptions have happened on other occasions, they do not typify a normal day at the Shaker library.

I asked all interview respondents about the notion that Black Shaker is “dangerous and stigmatized.” Everyone agreed that a spatial stigma existed, but the Black people I spoke with were adamant that the fear is overblown, at least, and unsubstantiated, at most. I asked Michaela, another 20-something Black Shaker High School alum, whether she feels unsafe
shopping or walking around Moreland. Michaela laughed and said “No. I’m Black. I’m not afraid of my own people.” I had coffee with Terry a Black police officer and the SHPD’s community relations liaison and, in our conversation, he told me that Moreland was not dangerous in terms of public safety. Terry said, despite the stereotypes or negative reputation, crime is at an all-time low overall in Shaker. He said that “petty” crimes—things like traffic violations, stolen bikes, and property crimes—as opposed to violent crimes make up the most cases in Shaker. According to Terry and others, the stigma of victimization is real, but the threat is exaggerated. This is consistent with findings on the racial and ethnic threat hypothesis. Chiricos et al. (1997) and others have documented the fact that, despite rates of crime, as the percentage of minority residents increase (especially true if Black), white residents’ perceptions of crime and lack of safety also increase. While it may be true that Black people are capable of stereotyping predominantly Black spaces as unsafe, I did not find this to be the case among Black adults in Black Shaker.5

Discussing the crime, safety, and teenagers in the Lee-Chagrin Shopping Plaza, Dre the barber said:

They’re not committing crimes. They do what we did. You’re irritating the businesses because you’re in a group, but they’re just walking through. Going home for the most part. I feel like people feel safe coming to Shaker. The majority of Blacks who live in border neighborhoods feel like this is a great place to [visit] because you get everything.

One of the main potential benefits of diversity is that interactions at the neighborhood level have the potential to channel resources in the form of social and cultural capital (Florida, 2003; Hartman & Squires, 2010). However, the lack of racially diverse activity spaces in this part of town means that Black visitors cannot possibly, in Dre the Barbers words, “get everything.” Maybe, however, they have exactly what they want and need—accessible, clean, and safe commercial and social spaces. Maybe their use of spaces in Black Shaker reveals their preferences for proximity and people (Clark, 2009). Maybe having access to racially diverse social interactions is not everything. Maybe, as Berrey (2015b) writes in Salon, “diversity is for white people.”

Discussion

It is reasonable to assume that Black people living in a racially diverse suburb like Shaker have a higher chance of seeing and interacting with a non-Black person compared with someone who lives in a more segregated neighborhood. However, social separation in Shaker persists. Shaker Heights was experimental and progressive in achieving diversity in housing and education in the post–World War II years, but today people from different backgrounds continue to move through space in different directions. Today, racial segregation at the micro-level marks where social contact or exposure to diversity can occur. It shortens the list of available spaces where a person might prefer to spend time. It structures where people are likely to encounter one another.

Findings in this paper raise the question: is where you live the only factor shaping who you get to interact with? In other words, if people living in Black Shaker have mostly Black interactions, is that surprising from a structural perspective? If you wanted to spend time in Shaker Heights, the likelihood that you will encounter and interact with someone of a different race will be structured not only by the housing segregation patterns but also
by activity spaces. Racially segregated activity spaces reduce the opportunities for people to stumble into a racially diverse setting. While I believe that having conversations and forming interracial coalitions is an important step in improving American race relations, the present study raises the concern that, most of the time, people talk (and walk) past each other in their activity spaces.

If living apart, or residential segregation, precipitates separation between members of different racial groups, as an extensive body of research suggests, a good argument is needed to understand why living closer together does not increase exposure. Demographic models have shown that as people of color reach a critical mass in cities, their rates of out-group exposure go down and rates of within-group isolation increase (Charles, 2003; W. Frey, 2015a; Kye, 2018). Most studies do not include a reliable measure for the exposure to visitors. How we use space within neighborhoods and its role in shaping social interactions is a question that needs more attention. Some case studies of urban (not suburban) neighborhoods suggest that social contact in diverse neighborhood spaces, such as stores and parks, can create a buffer against racial prejudice (Anderson, 2011; Grasmuck, 2005; Oliver, 2010). Unfortunately, this benefit may never be realized—even in an urban dog park (Mayorga-Gallo, 2018) and other ostensibly racially neutral public places—if social interactions are exclusive.

By selecting diverse places, as sites for potential interaction or single points in an activity space area, suburban researchers can gather insights on the spatial activity of visitors. My focus on the Black experience led me to places with Black visitors. In these settings, Black residents and visitors are present and based on the observed racial composition are unlikely to have chance encounters or extended visits with non-Black people. Within these settings, both groups of Black adults behave like place makers (Hunter et al., 2016). This creates a new kind of dilemma for the suburb of Shaker, a community that has created literal plans to deal with everything from traffic patterns and grass height restrictions to monitoring the racial balance of neighborhoods.

I argue that visitors to suburbs are an often-overlooked exposure variable. While this present study does not examine the role of formal institutions such as schools as an exposure variable, I believe visitors and schools are two factors more suburban researchers should consider. In research on diverse suburban schools, Sociologists Lewis et al. (2015) and Lewis-mccoy (2017) show that suburban diversity is rarely straightforward and even when it is achieved or extant (within schools) it is not enough to ensure equality between groups. The role of residential diversity in promoting integration—and ideally racial equality—in the social lives of suburban adults is especially elusive. More work is needed to understand what drives our behavior and decisions to travel to a place (or not), choose a long visit (or short stay), and to socialize with others (or not). These are important segregation variables that call for work on activity spaces.

We live in a day and age where many places, like Shaker, are choosing to celebrate diversity and are intentionally marketed as inclusive. This type of branding is a commitment. What exactly it is a commitment to is unclear. Shaker and many other suburban municipalities will become more diverse both in terms of their ethnорacial demographics and in the increased presence of commercial development (Clerge, 2019; Enrenhalt, 2012; W. Frey, 2015a). Both dynamics will change the type of visitors that come to suburban neighborhoods. Understanding the role of visitors—and the ties they make with residents—should be a goal of researchers. We must rethink the appraisal of a community as being diverse and inclusive based on residential status alone.
Notes

1. Shaker Schools have been the subject of many reports and research studies over the years. Ogbu’s (2003) work was one of the first to bring national attention to the racial achievement gap in Shaker. More recently, investigative journalist and Shaker native, Meckler (2019) published a report suggesting that racial strife (and a racial achievement gap) is still an issue in the public high school. See (Meckler, 2019).
2. Stephanie Tubbs Jones, a Cleveland, was the first African American woman to represent Ohio in Congress.
3. During my time in Shaker, I routinely visited and shopped at the only grocery store, Heinen’s, which is in the Moreland neighborhood. While Heinen’s stands out as an activity space that exposes people to a racially diverse potential interaction network, the perceived benefit of racial diversity in this shared space was not a theme that emerged in interviews or observations. Also, I did not experience or hear about racial contention or complaints from Black shoppers in the grocery store. See Pittman (2017) for a detailed analysis on the experience of “shopping while Black.”
4. The segregation measure of .49 (or 49) is based on author’s calculation. For context, Cleveland had a B-W dissimilarity score of 78.2 (in 2000) and 74.1 (in 2010). In both census years, Cleveland was the fifth most segregated city in America (Frey, 2015b). Relative to Cleveland, Shaker is less segregated. The relative standing or rank of Shaker Heights compared to other Ohio municipalities makes it difficult to give the suburb a label of integration. Based on the 2000 Census, for example, Shaker Heights (then 53.1 on the index of dissimilarity) was ranked 18th (of 56) in Black-White segregation among all cities or “places” in Ohio (Frey, 2015b).
5. I did not ask respondents in this sample about their perceptions of police or policing in Shaker. See Bell (2020) for a recent qualitative analysis that focuses on Clevelander’s perceptions of neighborhood demographics, police, and policing.

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