Racemaking in New Orleans: Racial boundary construction among ideologically diverse college students

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ABSTRACT: We explore how an ideologically diverse group of white students at Tulane University respond to evidence of racial inequality in post-Katrina New Orleans. In line with prior research, we find commonalities in racialized attitudes and behaviors between students whose racial ideologies otherwise differ. Drawing from anthropological theories of boundary construction and sociological work on color-blind racism, we argue that the Otherization of non-whites is part of the everyday worldviews and social practices of white Americans. We draw on fieldwork in New Orleans to demonstrate that racist stereotypes and beliefs in racial difference continue to be transmitted within white social spaces. We find that even the most progressive Tulane students are engaged in the construction and reinforcement of symbolic and spatial boundaries between themselves and African Americans. This achieves the purpose for which racial stereotypes were originally constructed – namely, the persistence of racial inequality.

Keywords: race; racemaking; color-blind racism; symbolic boundaries; spatial boundaries; New Orleans

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Introduction

Qualitative studies of racial attitudes reveal the prevalence of a post-civil rights racist ideology, often termed 'color-blind racism,' among white Americans of diverse socio-economic status and political affiliation (Crenshaw 1997; Carr 1997; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Gallagher 2003; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Forman 2004; McKinney 2004). In contrast to overt expressions of racial prejudice and white supremacist beliefs -- common among white Americans prior to and during the civil rights movement -- color-blind racism disguises racist sentiments with statements that Americans no longer 'see race.' This serves a strategic purpose: by asserting that the United States is now a 'color-blind' society, blame for persistent racial inequality falls not on white Americans and the racialized socio-political structure but instead on racial minorities. Drawing on cultural racism, color-blind racists allege that the culture and work habits of minority groups are to blame for their disadvantaged position. This more covert form of racism has important policy implications: color-blind racists oppose policies that aim to combat present racial discrimination and inequity, claiming this is 'reverse discrimination.'

Scholars have explored specific manifestations of color-blind racism (e.g. aversive racism and racial apathy) (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986; Hodson et al. 2002; Forman and Lewis 2006) and the socio-political consequences of these newer, subtler expressions of racial prejudice (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Carr 1997; Wildman 1996). In particular, social scientists have linked color-blind racism to the persistence of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Forman 2004; Gallagher 2003). Meanwhile, scholars such as Bonilla-Silva (2003) have also documented the existence of 'racial progressives' within white American society. As conceived by Bonilla-Silva, racial progressives differ from color-blind racists in that racial progressives both recognize and express concern about contemporary racial discrimination (2003, 132). In his analysis, however, Bonilla-Silva notes that racial

progressives are not immune to the influence of color-blind racism, and that their progressive racial ideologies have limits (2003, 134). Other studies have documented the deployment of color-blind rhetoric by otherwise progressive Americans, including social activists (Beeman 2015) and proud members of racially diverse neighborhoods (Burke 2012). Moreover, in his book *White Bound* (2012), Hughey discusses how both white antiracists and white nationalists draw upon and reinforce white supremacist narratives in their commitment to two radically opposed political causes. O'Brien (2003) similarly explores the influence of white supremacy on the everyday interactions of white antiracists.

We build upon this literature on white American racial ideologies and racialized behaviors by exploring the attitudes and behaviors of Tulane University students living in the aftermath of a racialized national disaster – Hurricane Katrina. We draw attention to commonalities between students who otherwise express divergent racial ideologies (color-blind racism versus racial progressivism). In doing so, we contribute to the small, but important literature on the racially prejudiced tendencies of otherwise progressive white Americans. To make sense of commonalities between color-blind racists and racial progressives, we propose a theoretical framework that draws on social scientific theories of boundary construction. We argue that racialized boundary construction by both color-blind racists and racial progressives is an important mechanism through which the dominant position of whites and racial inequality are maintained within the contemporary United States.

Overview of the study and its theoretical framework

This paper is based on interviews and participant observation conducted with undergraduate students at Tulane University from January-March 2009. Initially, we were interested in how students interpreted and reacted to media coverage of the aftermath of

Hurricane Katrina, which hit the Gulf Coast of the United States in August 2005. We wondered how the national conversation about race and inequality in New Orleans affected students' engagement with the local community and involvement in recovery. Study participants were ideologically diverse, expressing a variety of abstract reactions to racial inequality. Although the majority of participants demonstrated color-blind racism, almost one quarter expressed anger or sympathetic concern about the existence of racism and racial inequality. In line with the prior literature, however, we found commonalities between participants of various racial ideologies in terms of their attitudes and behaviors toward black Americans.

We propose a new theoretical framework for making sense of these commonalities. This framework integrates work from various disciplines, including anthropological theories of boundary construction, sociological work on color-blind racism and persistent inequality, and work by sociologists, geographers, and anthropologists on the influence of white supremacist discourse. We believe similarities between white racists and antiracists in attitudes and behaviors toward non-whites result from the fact that white Americans are socialized into a narrative of racial difference, particularly those individuals who grow up within predominantly white social spaces (Bonilla Silva 2003, 2006; Chesler, Peet and Sevig 2003). This leads even the most progressive white Americans to engage in practices that (re)produce racial boundaries.

We contend that racial boundaries are intimately tied to the persistence of racial inequality. The maintenance of the dominant status of whites relies on the Otherization of non-whites: in justifying colonialism, slavery and Jim Crow era policies and practices, whites claimed that there were inherent, fundamental differences between racial groups. Although older discourses of white supremacy today are rejected outwardly by most Americans, as a group white Americans are still engaged in hoarding resources and excluding non-whites

from these resources (Tilly 1998). Consequently, there has been little incentive to challenge the narratives, stereotypes and tropes associated with white supremacy, as exclusionary practices depend on white Americans continuing to perceive themselves as inherently different from non-whites. That is, the maintenance of racialized symbolic and spatial boundaries is a crucial component of the protection of the privileged status of whites.

We draw upon the case of white Tulane students living in post-Katrina New Orleans to illustrate this theoretical argument. We document the day-to-day micro-processes through which racial difference is reinforced. In our analysis, we highlight the discursive construction of symbolic boundaries by Tulane students, as well as their maintenance of racialized spatial boundaries. We also discuss how some students are able to express racially progressive ideologies while simultaneously participating in boundary construction that upholds a racialized social structure. Racial inequality is able to persist in the contemporary United States not only because the majority of white Americans buy into the current form of white supremacy (color-blind racism), but also because even those white Americans who challenge color-blind racism are engaged in practices and behaviors learned through socialization within white social spaces that reinforce the dominant position of whites. The link between boundary construction and color-blind racism is also discussed.

Data and methods

This paper draws from data collected during three months (January-March 2009) of fieldwork in New Orleans. At the time of the study, the freshman class at Tulane University was 85% white, with the vast majority of the student body hailing from out-of-state. In contrast, according to the 2010 U.S. census, 60.2% of New Orleans residents were black. During the year in which the study was conducted, the median income of white residents of

New Orleans was 20 times that of black residents (Kocher et al. 2011) and 65% of African American children under 5 were living in poverty (Hill 2011).

Fieldwork included participant observation on and off-campus, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews with students. Since this paper focuses on the construction and maintenance of racial boundaries by *white* Americans, we only include students who identified as white in our analysis. One of the authors, herself a white American, had previous experience at Tulane University. This provided access to Tulane students and background information pertaining to New Orleans and the white Tulane student body. Secondary and archival data were gathered through contact with the city government and Tulane administrators.

The data we draw upon within this paper primarily come from interviews with students. We conducted forty-two semi-structured interviews, each consisting of open-ended questions and a mapping exercise. Interviews ran between fifty minutes to two hours in length. Students were asked questions related to the following themes: reactions to Hurricane Katrina; social life, extracurricular activities, and involvement in the post-Katrina recovery process; and perceptions of: (1) danger and safety (2) inequality (3) racism (4) interactions between Tulane students and local residents and (5) interactions between black and white Tulane students. Finally, participants were asked to sketch a map of New Orleans. Particular attention was paid to which areas of New Orleans made it onto these maps.

Color-blind racists and racial progressives: the diverse racial ideologies of white Tulane students

When confronted with questions about Hurricane Katrina and racial inequality in New Orleans, our participants expressed diverse racial ideologies. The following quotes illustrate the breadth and diversity of participants' racial attitudes:

I feel like the racist tension [in New Orleans] is palpable – even though racist is such a strong word, I will have to say yes [New Orleans is a racist city]….[it's] just that, that structural inequality, and the difference between haves and have-nots, and skin color between haves and have-nots – it's not a coincidence. (Helen)

[I was] speculating in [the focus group] when that girl was like 'I'm not racist, I've had three black boyfriends,' are we as white Tulane students – are we more accepting of the black people or ethnicities that act like us? …It's like when professors have accents. We don't care if they talk the same but look different, but if we can't understand them, we get upset. (Kate)

[The people who didn't leave New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina hit] were retarded, stubborn. (John)

Using the criteria proposed by Bonilla-Silva (2003, 132), we identify Helen and Kate as racial progressives and John as a color-blind racist. Helen and Kate recognize that inequality and racial discrimination are widespread within the United States and express concern about this fact. These are the criteria used to identify racial progressives. Although John does not mention the race of the people under discussion, their race is implied, as the vast majority of those who did not evacuate the city prior to Hurricane Katrina were black. John fails to recognize the structural inequality that led many black residents to remain in the city. As a result, we label him a color-blind racist. Other participants express different forms of color-blind racism, such as recognition of racial inequality paired with an attitude of indifference (racial apathy[1]), or distress over class inequality coupled with denial of widespread racial discrimination. Overall, about one quarter of our participants were racial progressives, while three quarters were color-blind racists. Despite these differences, all participants construct racial difference as a significant barrier between themselves and African Americans. That is, they engage in the construction of racialized symbolic boundaries.

Constructing racial difference as cultural and dispositional difference:

black Americans as inferior or antagonistic Other

In the seminal introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), anthropologist Fredrik Barth argues that ethnic groups are formed not on the basis of a shared culture, but as a result of the identification of arbitrary characteristics as markers of membership or exclusion from a group. These arbitrary characteristics are then invested with deeper meaning and come to represent differences in values, perspectives, and approaches to life. Our interviews reveal that Tulane students interpret racial difference as translating into fundamental differences in culture, character, and values.

The construction of racialized symbolic boundaries by white Tulane students is intimately tied to the legacy of slavery and colonialism, and to the persistence of white supremacy. Within *Geographies of Exclusion* (1995, 42), Sibley notes that by valuating the labels 'white' and 'black' in juxtaposition to each other -- with the former indicating virtue, safety, order, and civilization and the latter signalling immorality, danger, chaos, and primitiveness -- Western colonists justified exploitation of indigenous groups of colonized territories. These same stereotypes of non-whites as inferior and threatening to whites were drawn upon and elaborated to justify slavery and Jim Crowism. In *The White Racial Frame* (2013, second edition), Feagin describes how white supremacist beliefs were then repackaged as color-blind racism following the triumph of the Civil Rights Movement. Although not all white Americans accept the tenets of color-blind racism, through their socialization within predominantly white social spaces white Americans come into contact with the racist stereotypes of the white racial frame (Feagin 2013, 91-92) and develop a worldview and approach to life that reinforces beliefs in racial difference (Bonilla-Silva 2003, 104). This leads white Americans to engage in the maintenance of racialized boundaries, which

ultimately allows racist ideologies to achieve their purpose: the exclusion of non-whites from valuable resources and the preservation of the dominant position of whites.

Our research in New Orleans illustrates how white Americans participate in the maintenance of racialized symbolic boundaries. About 20% of our participants construct African Americans as an inferior Other. In line with the findings of Bonilla-Silva and other scholars of color-blind racism, these participants employ discursive strategies to obscure the racist implications of stereotypes and arguments. As an example, we turn to an excerpt from Amy, a freshman at Tulane. When asked to discuss extracurricular activities, Amy responds with a narrative of her experience volunteering at a local, predominantly African American elementary school (emphasis added):

> It's impossible to get the kids to sit for more than six seconds -- *it's part of the culture, I think*, they just get into each other's faces and yell. They have no grasp of what it is they're learning…I'm sure the teachers have a really hard time, because *these kids have no discipline* – I mean, they're kids, but *I was definitely not like that in school!*

Here Amy is constructing symbolic boundaries between white Americans like herself and African American locals by asserting that the racial difference between the two groups translates into differing values, approaches to life, and cultures, with those of white Americans judged as superior. As Bonilla-Silva demonstrates within *Racism without Racists* (2003, 28), a central frame of color-blind racism is cultural racism --- the assertion that cultural differences between whites and non-whites can explain socio-economic inequalities. Notably, boundary theory aids in our understanding of all four frames of color-blind racism articulated by Bonilla-Silva. Abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (2003, 26) all share in common the discursive Otherization of non-whites, whether this involves calls for meritocracy, preferences for 'sticking to one's own kind,' tirades about the culture of 'those people,' or complaints about 'pulling the race card.'

During a focus group discussion of the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina, a student similarly constructed African American locals as inferior to white Americans:

> This is gonna sound awful…[Hurricane Katrina was] almost like…*survival of the fittest*, weeding out…The majority of people who stayed [in New Orleans] were in the 9th ward, McDonalds workers, Walmart workers, *not as fundamental to the country* as politicians, doctors, lawyers. I think this may have been a little in [the government's] minds. Maybe we don't need these people [as much as] someone else who has a higher standing *or who is white* (Tina)

The stereotypes Tina draws upon erect symbolic boundaries between white and black Americans: whites are highly skilled, indispensable members of society, while African Americans are low-skilled and expendable. These attitudes are tied to color-blind racism's narrative of meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva 2003, 32), though there is also a eugenicist tone to Tina's comment.

Although a minority of participants expressed a belief that African Americans are an inferior Other, over half constructed black Americans as antagonistic. The discursive Otherization of black Americans as antagonistic is part of the long history of maintaining symbolic boundaries between whites and non-whites. It is perhaps more commonly expressed since it carries less of the baggage associated with statements of racial superiority. One example of the narrative of black Americans as antagonistic is the common complaint that black service workers treat whites differently than they do black customers:

> …I'm not a racist person but there are times…where prejudices are being thrown on me by others and it makes me racially aware…[I'll] go to a fast food restaurant and everyone else [will get] their order and they'll 'accidentally' forget [mine]. That's happened to me so many times, it's just a matter of courtesy! (Ethan)

Like Ethan, many of our participants interpret antagonistic treatment as a form of reverse racism. Studies of whiteness, racism and racist ideologies have previously documented the narrative of 'white victimization' (Gallagher 1997; Feagin and Vera 1995; Pincus 2000; Chesler, Peet and Sevig 2003). Ethan's statement is also an example of a common rhetorical tactic Bonilla-Silva observed in interviews with white Americans. Ethan uses the phrase 'I'm not a racist person,' as a 'discursive buffer' (Bonilla-Silva 2003, 57) to obscure the racist connotation of his subsequent statement. Further, by framing black Americans as 'the racist ones,' Ethan transfers blame and feelings of guilt for his racist sentiments to black Americans (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 63-66). Simultaneously, Ethan's comment discursively constructs racialized symbolic boundaries. He uses the word 'they' to subtly reference black Americans, who are then placed into a category of people treated as homogenous in attitudes and behavior ('they'll "accidently" forget mine') and who differ from white Americans in values ('it's just a matter of courtesy!').

Racial progressives, like color-blind racists, construct African Americans as antagonistic toward white Americans. As previous studies of white antiracists, social activists, and other progressive white Americans find, even the most liberal Americans are affected by and perpetuate color-blind and white supremacist discourses (O'Brien 2003, 2009; Hughey 2012; Burke 2012; Beeman 2015). In contrast to color-blind racists, however, the antagonism our participants attribute to black Americans is sometimes perceived as deriving from anger and dissatisfaction with racial discrimination and inequality in the U.S. The effect, however, is largely the same: African Americans are constructed as an antagonistic Other, which is used as justification for limited interaction with members of this group. The following is an example:

> I didn't become really aware of how much racism is really alive until I went to
>
> college and I realized that blacks are extremely aware of their race. I feel like whenever I try
>
> to have conversations with black people, there's like a void, like some sort of gap or obstacle

between us that's always present and looming. I don't want to say anything offensive, and they take [so many things as] offensive…They come from a different background, and see things differently, and see it as 'us' and 'them.' Very seldom are there mixed races in groups of friends or mixed relationships. (Morgan)

It is clear that Morgan perceives black Americans as different from white Americans in worldview, life experience, and values. Although this may be true, whites were behind the historical initiative to draw distinctions between groups based on skin color. As a racial progressive, Morgan is aware of this, and yet appears to assign primary responsibility for the persistence of racial boundaries to black Americans, an act of flipping the script.[2] Tatum (1997, 52-74) notes that it is through exposure to the dominant white culture, experiences within institutions such as schools, and interactions with white Americans that black Americans develop a sense of racial identity. In fact, Hurtado, Gurin, and Peng (1994) find that white Americans display more racially exclusive behaviors than do non-whites (as discussed in Chesler, Peet, and Sevig [2003, 224]).

As Ethan and Morgan's interview excerpts demonstrate, narratives of African American antagonism are a means of discursively constructing racialized symbolic boundaries. By citing black antagonism toward whites, Tulane students also rid themselves of blame or responsibility for racial boundaries, thereby maintaining these boundaries. With the distinction between 'us' and 'them' also comes the idea that those on either side of the boundary lack common interests (Barth 1969). To avoid conflict, interaction between members of different ethnic groups should only occur in situations under which mutual understanding can be expected. This leads to the spatialization of symbolic boundaries.

Spatializing symbolic boundaries by creating a 'culture of fear'

Tulane students spatialize racialized symbolic boundaries by restricting most of their activities and movements to predominantly white and affluent areas of the city and by

actively avoiding sections of New Orleans perceived as 'poor' and 'black.' A term exists to describe this phenomenon: the 'Tulane Bubble.' This mental construct is employed by both local residents and students to symbolize the limited scope of Tulane students' understanding of and experience within New Orleans. Our study participants reveal that the Tulane Bubble is not simply the product of a tendency among college students to socialize with classmates at the exclusion of local residents. Like the concept of 'the edge" in Anderson's ethnography *Streetwise* (1990, 154) -- a term used by residents of a predominantly white, middle-class community to refer to the boundary separating them from a neighboring black, lower class community -- the Tulane Bubble is also the product of a culture of fear that associates blackness and poverty with violence and crime. That is, Tulane students actively participate in a culture that *fears* blackness. This culture of fear, with its roots in white supremacist discourse, affects color-blind racists and racial progressives alike.

At the time of our study, safety had increasingly become an issue of concern for Tulane undergraduates. This was particularly visible in the level of anxiety expressed about sexual assault. By the end of the 2007-2008 school year, Tulane security reported 23 incidents of 'forcible sexual offenses' involving Tulane students (*The Tulane Hullabaloo*, March 6, 2009). Walking around campus, we encountered a number of lawn signs and posters produced by the 'SAFE T' program, which 'was implemented [fall of 2008] after a series of sexual assaults' (*The Tulane Hullabaloo* 2009*)*. Rape Aggression and Defense (RAD) courses had become popular among female Tulane students. During the 2009 Mardi Gras holiday, a white female Tulane student was forcibly taken from the St. Charles entrance of campus to Audubon Park, where she was raped and robbed by an African American man. This crime instigated a flurry of conversation and panic among members of the student body. A few days later, three of five front-page headlines of the school newspaper, *The Tulane Hullabaloo,* drew attention to incidents of local violence.[3] Notably, of 11 incidents of rape

reported to either the Tulane University Police Department (TUPD) or another campus authority in academic year 2008-2009, only the Audubon Park incident was confirmed to be perpetrated by a black male. As the TUPD indicates in its 2012 guidelines for reporting sexual assault, 'women most often are sexually assaulted by someone they know' (*Keeping Tulane secure* 2012, 8). According to data published in October 2008 on the website of the National Institute of Justice, 85-90% of female college students who report sexual assault know the perpetrator. Further, statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice suggest that most incidents of rape and sexual assault are intra-racial, with 75% of white female victims reporting a white male perpetrator (BJS 2008). Despite this, Tulane students frequently expressed concern about sexual assault at the hands of a minority perpetrator, an attitude linked to a larger culture of fear. This culture of fear leads to the reinforcement of racialized spatial boundaries.

The culture of fear among Tulane students is associated with 'strategies of protection from criminals' that affect and reinforce the 'spatial and ethnic configuration of the city' (Rial and Grossi 2002, 109). Although most participants deny intentionally avoiding areas of New Orleans during the day, over a third say they rarely venture off-campus or out of the Uptown area. Further, the mapping exercise in the interviews reveals that large swathes of the city are left unexplored by participants. About three quarters of interviewees report intentionally avoiding particular areas of the city at night. Our participants produced a list of about 35 specific locations and generic types of areas that they avoid (e.g. 'dark alleys,' 'sketchy areas,' 'dilapidated areas'). Over a third of these locations are perceived as predominantly black and impoverished, such as the Ninth Ward, New Orleans East, Holly Grove, and the public housing projects. A few students state that they avoid 'poor black areas' and 'ghettos.' In other words, Tulane students develop 'mental maps' (Anderson 1990, 216) for navigating the city that limit contact with local African Americans and low-income

areas. Although a handful of participants reference high crime rates in justifying aversive behavior, studies that control for crime rate find an inverse relationship between the percentage of black males in a community and white perceptions of safety (Quillian and Pager, 2001). That is, these perceptions of danger generally derive from stereotypical ideas of the African American Other rather than statistical knowledge of the safety of an area.

In "The White Space," Anderson (2015, 19-20) argues that the image of the black ghetto reinforces and legitimates the racist practice of erecting spatial boundaries and protecting whites space. In line with this, the reasons Tulane students provide for their avoidance practices often draw on a discourse linking criminality with poverty and blackness:

> No, [I don't really avoid certain areas of the city during the day]…except like the most extreme *areas of poverty*…places like *the ghetto*, places where – *where it's dangerous because you're the minority, everyone's black*, and you kinda stand out. (Carol)

> At night, if I'm with a group of four people, I'll go anywhere, but even still – a couple years ago, four or five of us decided to walk from Bourbon [street] to Frenchmen [street], and one girl got really scared, '*cuz she saw a black person* (Jessica)

> When you hear about a shooting once a month and you don't really know the cause, I don't really want to get myself involved in [that] neighborhood [that had the shooting]…at Tulane you're in a bubble…once I'm outside of that radius, I'm much more cautious…*being a white girl*, I'm kind of a target for thieves and stuff. (Laura)

Explanations for students' avoidance practices are both drawn from and reinforce symbolic boundaries between white and black Americans. Nearly 75% of participants construct African Americans as a violent, criminal Other. This includes racial progressives, as illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

> On the one hand, I feel really sorry for [black Americans] because society, I feel, has failed these people and that's why they turn to violence and crime. I feel bad on the one hand that we've created this *culture of poor black people who steal*. But then I get pissed at them, like don't do that, you're making yourself look even worse….and whenever you feel those stereotypes you get upset because you're like, why am I so scared? (Wendy)

Like stereotypes of African Americans as an inferior or antagonistic Other, the stereotype of black Americans as violent criminal is linked to both historical and contemporary efforts to protect the dominant position of whites. Frederickson (1971) describes how the abolition of slavery threw many white Americans into a panic. The newly earned freedom of former slaves threatened the privileged status of white Americans, who could no longer exploit black American labor for profit. Moreover, the end of slavery threatened the safety and purity of white Americans and white social space. This 'moral panic' (Sibley 1995, 39) incited an upsurge in the lynching of black Americans, as racist vigilantes attempted to maintain control and subjugation of the black population (Frederickson 1971, 282).

To defend this brutal practice, white supremacists amplified the racist stereotype of black men as violent beasts and depicted lynching mobs as justice seekers and protectors of white female virtue (Gossett 1963, 270). The violation of a virginal white woman by a licentious and ferocious black man became a common theme in literature, a well-known example being Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (Gossett 1963, 272). Various social scientists and medical researchers cited evidence that blacks were more violent and sexually aggressive than whites (Frederickson 1971, 279). Although the association of blackness with violence and criminality existed before this time, Frederickson argues that these efforts to defend lynching entrenched the 'black brute' stereotype in the white imagination (282).

As interviews with white Tulane students indicate, the influence of the 'black brute' stereotype is still felt today and commonly reflected by concerns about violent 'thugs' and 'criminal predators' (Welch 2007; Haberman 2014). From an early age, white Americans are

taught to associate blackness with criminality, violence, and disorder, in particular through the influence of white-dominated media. The news media, like individuals, selectively choose what information will be drawn upon in creating a narrative. The information selected often supports pre-conceived ideas about an African American Other. An example of this would be the labelling of African Americans taking items from abandoned stores in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as 'looters,' while white Americans engaging in similar activities were described as 'finding' supplies for survival. Media coverage of events in Ferguson and Baltimore in 2014-2015 similarly reflected and reinforced stereotypes of black violence and criminality. In summary, portrayals of the black Other as violent reinforce and justify racialized spatial boundaries. As discussed below, spatial boundaries play an important role in maintaining racial inequality and white dominance in the contemporary United States.

The spatial dimension of symbolic boundaries ensures the persistence of beliefs in racial difference, which is crucial for maintaining racial inequality. If cross-boundary contact is not restricted, this threatens the symbolic boundary (Barth 1969, 15-16) and perceptions of common interests among whites. Spatial boundaries help regulate interracial interactions and ensure that cross-border contacts do not compromise either white solidarity or perceptions of black Americans as an Other. This also explains why certain forms of interracial interaction are more socially acceptable than others. Highly regulated, hierarchical interracial interactions, such as volunteering at an under-resourced public school or hiring a non-white domestic worker, are unlikely to shift white Americans' sense of racial identity and are thus widely accepted (Anderson 2015, 4). Similarly, the everyday interracial interactions within 'ethnic' restaurants and shops in diverse communities more often represent white residents' 'consumption' of Otherized cultures than the development of 'meaningful relationships' (Burke 2012, 102). Interracial marriage, in contrast, threatens a sense of 'us' and 'them'

(Tatum 1997, 168-169). The common concern among white Americans that interracial marriage has negative consequences for children (Tatum 1997, 172) serves, whether consciously or unconsciously, to limit this boundary-threatening practice. Consequently, interracial marriage is still a fairly uncommon practice among whites – in 2015, just 7% of white American newlyweds married across racial lines (Wang 2015).

Racialized spatial boundaries not only safeguard white racial identity and a sense of 'groupness,' they also uphold the dominant position of whites. As Anderson (2015) discusses in "The White Space," spatial boundaries help white Americans exclude non-whites from access to valuable resources. 'White flight' and the active avoidance of non-white neighborhoods contribute to the concentration of wealth and privilege within predominantly white communities (Johnson and Shapiro 2003, 184-186). These communities are able to provide social services, including high quality education, to their residents, while effectively excluding most non-whites from access to these resources. Burke (2012, 71-72) notes that racial segregation and the consequent unequal dispersion of resources is even present in racially diverse communities. In summary, contemporary racial segregation and the active avoidance of non-white areas are important means through which white racial identity and privilege are maintained.

Racialized boundaries constrain students' agency and block white antiracist activism

Racialized symbolic and spatial boundaries reinforce white Americans' limited exposure to, knowledge of, and motivation to address racial inequality. This deters social change on an individual level, as evident in Tulane students' responses to questions about their (lack of) involvement in combating racism and racial inequality in New Orleans. That is, racial boundaries not only reinforce racial inequality on a macro-level, but also constrain individuals' agency and generate roadblocks to white anti-racist activism.

It is important to distinguish lack of involvement in antiracist efforts from general student apathy toward socio-political issues. During interviews, we asked participants to describe their extracurricular activities. Roughly 60% are involved in social or political activism, such as membership in a political organization (e.g. the College Democrats), environmental protection group, animal rights group, or international aid organization.[4] Students are much more likely to be involved in organizations combating discrimination and prejudice in foreign countries than to be members of groups tackling local, racialized issues of inequality and discrimination. Students are also more likely to express frustration with class inequality, which they often de-racialize, than with racial inequality.

In responding to the question 'how can Tulane students help combat racism and inequality in New Orleans?' about 55% of participants express little concern about this issue or suggest that it is not the responsibility of Tulane students. This hints at symbolic boundaries dividing 'our' (Tulane students/white Americans) problems from those of the African American Other. Other scholars have conceptualized this indifference as 'racial apathy,' a form of color-blind racism. Although we are not the first to document racial apathy, we believe it important to tie this concept to symbolic boundary construction. Racial apathy is linked to Otherization processes that draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them.' As a corollary, Feagin and Vera (1995) identify the ability to empathize with non-whites, which involves challenging racialized boundaries, as characteristic of many white antiracists.

Forman and Lewis (2006) argue that there is a relationship of circular causality between racial segregation and feelings of indifference toward racialized issues. This suggests that the spatial boundaries of the Tulane Bubble not only result from but also reinforce students' racial apathy. The interview excerpt below illustrates that many students suggest either implicitly or explicitly that the Tulane Bubble limits their exposure to racial inequality and other problems affecting New Orleans:

> We're kind of stuck on campus and that kind of shields us from what's going on …in other
> parts of the city. All we see is huge houses, so we don't get an image of what it's actually
> like in New Orleans… I feel like…most students are not aware of the help that needs to be
> contributed…we don't really know what's going on around us…[It's like] a cycle, because no
> one's really aware, so how are we gonna encourage other students to participate? (Keith)

As Keith argues, the restriction of students to the Tulane Bubble reinforces their limited
understanding of the problems facing the city. Consequently, Tulane students remain largely
uninvolved in addressing problems affecting communities of color. As previously
mentioned, most study participants were color-blind racists. Although frequent exposure to
racial inequality will not in and of itself alter these individuals' racial attitudes, living a life
segregated from evidence of these problems makes any change improbable.

For racial progressives, living within predominantly white social spaces allows them
to relegate racial inequality to the back of their minds. A number of racial progressives also
cite the perceived hostility of African Americans as a reason for remaining uninvolved in
such issues, as the following quote demonstrates:

> I think it's safest for us NOT to open our mouths [when it comes to the city's problems]. We
> are regarded as Jewlane, we might come across as if we know better. We're white, we're not
> natives, we're not locals, what the hell makes us think we know better or understand. The
> best thing we can do is to act as if we don't care if you're black or a minority. I don't think
> we can go out and say 'this is what you need to do.' (Rebecca)

Rebecca's statement demonstrates the inhibiting effects of constructing African Americans as
antagonistic toward whites. Similarly, when we asked another participant what she thought
Tulane students could do to address local problems, she launched into a discussion that
highlights the constraints posed by symbolic boundaries:

> I really like photography and obviously people interest me as an Anthropology major, so I
> thought it would be really good to talk to [a community of homeless African Americans

living underneath highway I-10], to find out what they are doing…I think that it could have been very helpful, and maybe it could have gotten the government's attention... it just would have made me very, very nervous, and it would have felt very uncomfortable the entire time. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with these people, but it would just be way out of my comfort zone, I don't know how the people would have responded, because I'm somebody – as different as they are from me, I'm just as different to them. It was just a task I felt I could not personally undertake. I wish I had, but I still feel it was something I could not have done. (Erin)

Erin ultimately decided against speaking to members of this impoverished community because she labels herself as different from them and worries about how she would be received, given this difference. Although it is important to consider one's impact on a marginalized community, this belief in difference effectively stopped Erin from any involvement. That is, even if Tulane students are aware of racial inequality and do want to do something about it, they must still wrestle with racialized boundaries. Studies of white antiracists demonstrate that even these men and women participate in the Otherization of people of color (Hughey 2012; O'Brien 2003).

Conclusion

Many of our observations are in line with the findings of other scholars of contemporary racism in the United States. Our novel integration of anthropological theories of boundary construction into sociological work on color-blind racism and the racialized attitudes and behaviors of white Americans distinguishes our work from previous scholarship and provides new insight into the mechanisms by which the dominant status of white Americans is preserved. We theorize that boundary construction is a key contributor to the racial stratification process, and by revealing this mechanism for preserving racial inequality, we not only contribute to an understanding of the persistence of racial inequality in the

United States but also help resolve the paradox posed by the racialized behaviors of racial progressives.

To hoard resources and exclude non-whites from access to these resources, white Americans need to perceive themselves as not only inherently different from but also in conflict with non-whites. Symbolic boundaries, which have their roots in colonialism and slavery, contribute to this sense of difference and are maintained through the transmission of racist stereotypes, tropes, and narratives within white social spaces. The spatial boundaries that circumscribe white spaces are both strengthened by and reinforce feelings of racial difference. Although not all white Americans accept the tenets of color-blind racism, almost all are engaged in racialized boundary construction. This constrains the agency of even the most progressive white Americans vis-à-vis racial justice issues. Finally, although not empirically addressed within this paper, spatial boundaries are a means through which white Americans exclude non-whites from resources.

We draw on the case of white Tulane students living in post-Katrina New Orleans to illustrate this theoretical argument. Tulane students actively construct and maintain symbolic and spatial boundaries between themselves and African Americans. Language, including stereotypes, tropes, and narratives, is used to construct African Americans as an antagonistic or even inferior Other with whom Tulane students have little in common. The 'black brute' stereotype contributes to a 'culture of fear' that associates blackness and poverty with violence and crime. The 'Tulane Bubble' and Tulane students' racialized avoidance practices illustrate how this 'culture of fear' is linked to the spatialization of symbolic boundaries. Racial boundary construction has implications for students' agency. For color-blind racists, there is a mutually reinforcing relationship between racialized boundaries and ignorance or apathy about racial inequality in New Orleans. For racial progressives, spatial boundaries allow them to push such issues to the back of their minds. The Otherization of African

Americans through symbolic boundary construction is also related to students' hesitancy to become involved in racialized social issues.

This study provides information that may benefit antiracist efforts. Our interviews with racial progressives demonstrate that educating affluent white Americans about structural racism and inequality, while certainly useful, will not in and of itself transform white American behavior toward non-whites. Efforts must also focus on combatting the symbolic and spatial boundaries constructed by even the most racially progressive white Americans. Combining racially progressive education that tackles the Otherization of black Americans with increased opportunities for non-patronizing, interracial interaction may be a first, tentative step toward combating racialized boundaries and the racial inequality that they maintain. That being said, it is also important for white Americans to learn to embrace the discomfort that involvement in antiracist movements may entail. White Americans have much to learn from the mistakes they will inevitably make as allies in the struggle against racism and racial inequality.

Notes

[1] The term 'racial apathy' is used by a number of social scientists, most notably Forman and Lewis (2006), to describe the indifference of white Americans toward racialized issues of discrimination and inequality. It is also used to describe the tendency of white Americans to actively avoid interacting with people of different racial backgrounds.

[2] According to Summerson Carr (1994), an individual 'flips the script' when she reverses her conventional, expected role in a relationship. In this case, Morgan presents herself as a *victim* of boundaries constructed by non-whites.

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[3] The headlines of interest read as follows: 11th rape reported in 08-09"; "Shots fired on Mardi Gras Day"; and "TUPD, Gibson respond to rape."

[4] Some of these organizations were locally based, such as the Homeless Action Team, an organization dedicated to helping homeless New Orleanians, and the Gulf Restoration Network, an NGO dedicated to local environmental issues.

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