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Preliminary Research in Identity and
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Maria Lourdes Pease

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PATTERNS OF POWER AND PLACE:
PRELIMINARY RESEARCH IN IDENTITY AND
THE USE OF PUBLIC SPACE

By

Maria Lourdes Pease

A THESIS

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

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The Use of Public Space

By

Maria Lourdes Pease

Historically, the use of public space by Americans of African descent has been circumscribed by larger social conditions. Empirical evidence suggests that the use of public space is contingent on the social context in which it exists. Cultural dynamics of groups who are defined by "race" promote the differential use of physical space which is presumed to have specific purposes. This paper uses qualitative data to examine the use of a public lobby by people of Asian, African and European descent, in consideration of the social dynamics of power, place and identity, as they relate to the physical and social location of racial groups. This study supports the notion that those who most closely identify with groups who hold power are more likely to occupy spaces which are designated as "public."

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I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

All physical space exists within a social context. This social fact is illustrated by the transformation of access to public accommodations, and therefore the public, under Title II of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Under that bill, equal access to public accommodations for Black as well as White people was secured. This essay reflects on collected data which indicates a differential use of public space within a racially diverse population. In fact, although racial distinctions are used, the real issue here is the construction of identities, public space, and social space. Culture, and the myriad manifestations of that process, including identity, architecture, design and ideology, derive from social history, and from a social and spatial division of labor which produces social relations which are themselves part of the formation of culture. Specifically, the construction of social relations and the construction of culture are simultaneous. Rather than being immutable, culture, and cultural productions, while not inherent to a group, are formed dialectically as part and parcel, and are a residual consequence of that group's traditions, myths, pragmatisms, and life conditions, including their relations to and with other groups. Culture is a sort of "build-as-you-go" proposition.

In this qualitative study, cultural relations are seen to be manifested in the differential use of public space by a people who might be regarded as having held social positions very much like Georg Simmel's strangers.¹

This data may reveal a direction for future in-depth research on the very historical, and nonessentialist, nature of culture as it is reflected in the use of "public" space and, by extension, on the nature of "the public." In other words, this participatory-observational study in the lobby of Owen Center Graduate Dormitory should support the notion that the public-ness in public spaces may be mediated by other social factors, like racial identity or cultural relations. This initial study may be useful as an indicator of larger social phenomena, as it may be useful in helping to understand some of the more subtle dynamics of "racial climate," cultural disjuncture, and of the need for a democratization and diversification of public spaces.

The obvious questions which we can derive from this study are about the boundaries of power, identity and cultural relations as they are constructed and mediated through social relations. Are there larger, more generalizable patterns of power and place? What relations exist between the use of public facilities and power, and what social facts mediate those relationships? Are patterns of domination and

¹ Georg Simmel. "The Stranger" in Georg Simmel, 1858-1918: A Collection of Essays. Kurt Wolff (ed.). Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1959. pp 402-408.

subordination reflected in the occupation or use of physical space. One supposition is that what space a people occupy or control is indicative of their access to power in that society. Clearly, the history of Native Americans and African descent people in this society supports the notion that identity, place and power have been intimately connected.

Contemporary academic social theory has just begun to deal with this most material structuring of social relations, where studies of environmentalism and post-modern theories have created a natural nest for the emergence of issues surrounding the relation between our physical and social locations. Investigation into the relationship of physical space to social relations has been discussed by Anthony King, who suggests that,

if built environments, in all their various conceptualizations, are as important as socially-constituting mechanisms ... then they should (as indeed they do) provide us with some evidence, some data about the nature and organization of society and culture as well as its spatial expression or constitution.²

An ideology of manifest destiny resulted in the reservation of certain lands for occupation by native nations. A myriad of other rational, scientific and otherwise were manufactured to accommodate the physical and psychological

² King, Anthony. "Architecture, Capital and the Globalization of Culture." in Global Culture, Nationalism, Globalism, and Modernity. Mike Featherstone (ed.). London: SAGE Publications, 1990. pp. 404-405.

subjugation of enslaved Africans as concerned their "proper place" in society, which were manifested socially as Jim Crow restrictions on Black occupation of selected land, apartments, school rooms, jobs, restaurants, buses, and other private and public accommodations. All this lent credence to the notion that the particular social construction of race in the United States has made the occupation of space a real and symbolic representation of the control and access to power to which race has been summarily wedded.

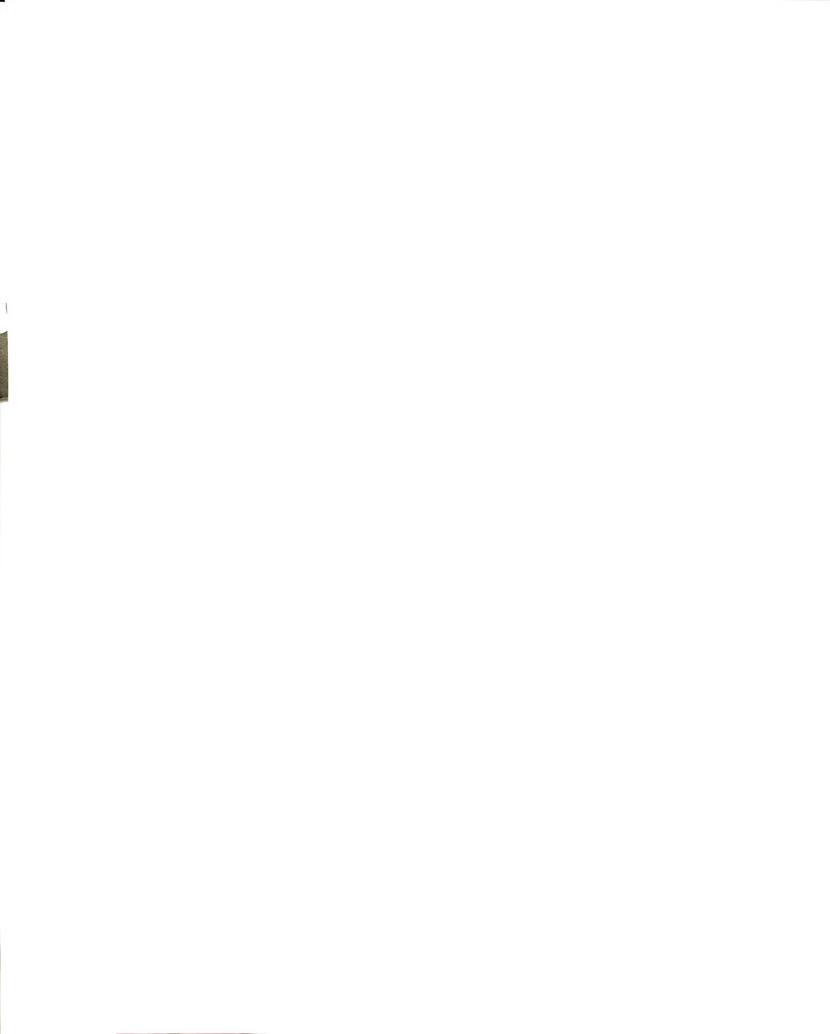
The social and physical "place" of Black people was circumscribed, for the majority, by legal and extra legal restrictions. Where one sat, lived and congregated was constructed around a "one drop rule," which rendered any person with any African ancestry, Black.

This definition emerged from the American South to become the nation's definition, generally accepted by Whites and Blacks alike. Blacks had no other choice. As we shall see, this American cultural definition is taken for granted as readily by judges, affirmative action officers, and Black protesters as it is by Klu Klux Klansmen.³

The application of this rule in the United States is crucial to racial identity since it is the social aspect of race and, therefore, the only aspect.

At an earlier point in time in the history of our nation, the physical spaces that racially differentiated groups could

³ Davis, James F. Who Is Black? One Nation's Definition. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991. p. 5.



occupy were circumscribed by law. These *de jure* boundaries included segregated neighborhoods, restrictions on land sales, and the regulation of public spaces like parks, waiting rooms in train and bus depots, as well as the trains and buses themselves.

Then there were *de facto* norms of spacial use. Black people could only enter White-controlled public spaces through back doors, and could not enter the lobbies of White hotels. Furthermore, at some time, in at least some places, Black people were required to give passage to Whites on sidewalks. These were questions of etiquette, not of law.

These *de jure* exclusions, related to the social use of public space, were legally smashed in the 1960s. Many of the *de facto* exclusions atrophied, metamorphosed, or went underground without the complementary force of law. Today the concerns are different, as we see apparent concern about the self-segregation of students by racial groups on college campuses. White, Black and Asian students sit at separate tables in cafeterias. There is concern about theme houses on campus which cater to Hispanic, Asian, White or gay students. Thus, even without laws, "birds of a feather flock together."

Now, this study looks at a related issue, but one that involves the differential use of public space by individuals or groups that are differently defined by social race. Perhaps only accidentally, the boundaries of racial identity and place have converged to become representative of access to power,

and of the attendant material conditions for Blacks and Whites.

It is worth investigating whether, even with the removal of Jim Crow and other sanctions, space and place are still representative sites of differential social perspectives and positions. This study specifically looks at Black people's use of public space as representative of the degree of their social integration into the community which we can call Owen Graduate Students.

II. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE PROBLEM

Much of the contemporary discourse around questions of public space, culture and identity is situated in the realm of post-modernism. Place connotes viewpoint, weltanschauung and social position in the same way that it denotes territoriality and even nationality.¹ The familiar tropes of Black dislocation, Black dispersion, or Black resettlement situate some relations of place to race in ways that are fundamental to notions of identity, and the contradictions of dislocation/access and disuse/privilege. Prior to the desegregation of public accommodations under the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Black people's (public and private) place was socially and materially defined as subordinate to White comfort and control. In his discussion of the concept of social race, Charles Wagley explains some of the importance of the "one-drop rule" which was unique to the United States:

In the United States, by emphasizing ancestry combined with a rule of descent, a system of castelike social races with little mobility between the groups has been amenable to segregation and productive of tension.²

¹ Gilroy, Paul. "It's a Family Affair." in Black Culture. Gina Dent (ed.). Seattle: Bay Press, 1992. p. 303.

²Wagley, Charles. "The Concept of Social Race in the Americas." in Contemporary Cultures and Societies of Latin America. Dwight B. Heath (ed.). New York: Random House, 1965. p. 531.

African-Americans are both a social and a numerical minority in the United States. Census data for 1990 for the United States indicate that within the resident population, Whites make up approximately 80 percent, Blacks 12 percent, Asian or Pacific Islanders 2 percent, and Hispanics 9 percent.³ Furthermore, Black people in the U.S. are a social minority. And, like the social aspect of race, it is the social aspect of minority status that is most meaningful. As we know from the history of South Africa or pre-Zimbabwe Rhodesia, a numerical minority has the potential to wield great control over social and physical space.

The heritage of the Black experience in the United States is a history of racial exploitation and exclusion, *de facto* and *de jure*. From the kidnapping of millions of Africans transported across the middle passage to the enslavement of those Africans across this country, the history of Black people in the U.S. has been one of physical and social subjugation of a very violent sort. However, that is only part of the story. An equally, if not more important, element of the Black experience has been the agency of Black people acting for themselves not always as victims but as map-makers creating their own realities and being that led to their social identity.

³ 1993 Statistical Abstracts of the United States. Resident Population by Race and Hispanic Origin. Washington D.C.: Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, 1993.

Black people's status as a numerical minority and their heritage of subjugation, exclusion and agency have, in the past and present, led to particular racial identities of themselves and definitions by others, the internal-external nexus. One result is what W.E.B. DuBois calls a "two-ness," which is a reality that lends itself to a "strangerness complex."

Some notions of identity are implicit in questions postulated early on in sociological studies. For example, of the contributions of Georg Simmel to sociological thought, one of the most important, because of its fundamental nature, is his presentation of the stranger. For these purposes, the stranger as a social type is not as important as the notion of strangerness; that is, the dynamics of social relations that engender particular boundaries of social and physical space.

Simmel's essay is instructive in describing the notion of social distance which can sometimes become manifest through material culture and the use of public space. Strangerness provides a way of conceptualizing a historical social relation and helps define the (fluid) social boundaries of identity and, in turn, the physical boundaries of space for Black people.

However, Simmel's conceptions of the stranger are predicated on relations between groups which crystallized out of individual relations. Rather, the point is otherwise. Relations of strangerness derive from economic, social and

political relations that are historically conditioned, including, and especially, the ever-present ideological spheres that help create and become culture.

The first step in attempting to understand public space use by people of African descent in social relations of strangeness is to clarify strangers. Simmel's essay on the stranger posits the social type of stranger as having four interlocking elements: mobility, social distance, objectivity, and commonality. But it is the element of social distance that most concerns us here.

Key here is the symbolic nature of otherness as it has been embedded in a systematic non-incorporation of a distinct segment of society. Obviously then, time and redundancy might exaggerate and reify these relations into increasing social distance and social space between supernumerary others and the dominant group. Rather than socialization of a mechanistic kind, history is the driving force behind the construction of strangeness.

An increase in social distance implies the heightening of the dialectic relationship which positions the stranger as simultaneously part of, and distinct from, the group. Strangeness requires being in a foreign element without being integrated within that element. It is arguable that this is the case with African-Americans.

It is social distance which is at the heart of Simmel's conceptualization of the stranger and which concerns us here.

Several aspects of mobility are played out in social space, creating social distance which helps delineate strangeness.

Simmel describes this dynamic in terms of nearness/farness. The relative nearness or farness is implied by both supernumerary and otherness status, which exposes the paradoxical nature of strangeness which Simmel describes: "... in relationship to [the stranger], distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who is also far, is actually near."⁴

According to Simmel, social space is often typified by the social position and therefore the social relations of strangers, or, as it is being articulated here, strangeness to the dominant group. That is, strangeness is largely defined by the relation of one segment of the population to another. In particular, strangers occupy positions in society that regular members do not.⁵ Certainly in the case of African-descent Americans this is historically true. As enslaved and then "reserved"⁶ labor, their position has been distinct from all other groups in the U.S.

However, whether Black people occupy these positions because they are strangers, or vice versa, seems generally

⁴ Georg Simmel. "The Stranger." in Georg Simmel, 1958-1918: A Collection of Essays. Kurt Wolff (ed.). Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959. p. 402.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Braverman, Harry. Labor and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century. Monthly Review Press, 1974. pp. 377-403.

problematic in Simmel's construction of social types, not least because of ahistoric and static elements in formalist logic. In this society, as race has been constructed, the degree to which one can or does identify with the descendants of Europeans helps describe the degree to which relations of strangeness exist. It is the descendants of Europeans who have most often occupied and controlled territory in the United States and who are more able to settle within economic and social mainstreams from which the dominant culture is forged. This is a structure as well as an ideological reality. Furthermore, throughout their history in this country, Black people have had legal and social sanctions around mass public gatherings, so much so that much African-American socialization has often occurred in private, or even surreptitiously. Where Black people went was constrained, but so was what they did in public places.

The occupation of public spaces, like the lobby of a building on the campus of a major university, reflects an ideological and social relation, and a relative place of power. Walking down a public street and gathering on the sidewalk of a public street represent distinct uses of space. It was this implicit understanding of the relation of physical space to power which made the sit-in such a powerful tool for Black people in the 1960s. When we talk about access to public space, we must conceptualize that space as social; that is, as both physical and cultural. The analysis which follows focuses

on the relations of space, power and identity as they reflect and shape the social relations that form the basis of cultural relations.

III. RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODS

The data for this study was gathered over an 11-week period in the Spring of 1994, during which I observed the use of the lobby of Owen Graduate Center. Owen Center at Michigan State University is a dormitory ostensibly reserved for graduate students. Occasionally, older undergraduates are housed there as well.

I sat on a couch in the northeast corner of the lobby of Owen Center for two-hour periods on different days and times of day to attempt to gather a sample, and to observe whether types of behavior on various days and times could be compared. Initially, I expected to observe the different kinds of behaviors in a public place as that space is mediated by times of day and days of the week.

The decision to "sample" various days and times of day was an appropriate research strategy to determine whether there was a positive relationship between the temporal and the spatial. The sampling of days indicates that it was not parameters of times of day that could account for the absence of African-descent Owen graduate students. Over a cumulative period of 24 hours we can assume that the pattern of usage of a public space is somehow representative of a general pattern, irrespective of day or time of day, and therefore neither is



an essential variable affecting the use of the lobby by African-descent residents. As I sat in the lobby observing the patterns of use, I became not just an observer but a participant, to the extent that my presence there as a woman of African descent created an anomaly and, perhaps, observably so. Also, observations were limited to those who either stopped in the corridor or lobby. People who walked through the corridor without stopping were not observed, noted or considered in this study.

Since the notion of race is central to my study, I was guided by the use of Wagley's notion of social race. He asserts that:

The term "social race" is used because these groups or categories are socially, not biologically, defined in all of our American societies, although the terms by which they are labeled may have originally referred to biological characteristics.¹

The idea that social relations determine the substantive meaning of race in the United States² gets to the core of the issue by linking the material and social in ways that illuminate some of the paradoxical and primary elements of cultural formation.

Four groups are identified in this study: Blacks or African-Americans, Whites, Asians, and Hispanics. Of those

¹ Wagley, Charles. "The Concept of Social Race in the Americas." in Contemporary Cultures and Societies of Latin America. Dwight B. Heath (ed.). New York: Random House, 1965. p. 531.

² Ibid., 539.

groups, my focus was on the use of space by Black people, especially in relation to Whites.

My notes indicate that people were identified *a priori* according to my subjective definitions, based on physiognomy, while recognizing that "racial and ethnic definitions are highly variable, not so much between individuals but more particularly between groups and societies."³ Moreover, notes also indicated some ambiguity in the categorization of "Latinos," as they are differentiated from Black and White people. This ambiguity, the sample size, and the generally short duration of the investigation reflect some of the limitations of this study.

Besides field notes, this study incorporated notes from three informal interviews conducted at the end of my field observations. Interviewees in this study were selected at random, according to their availability and willingness to talk.

The data presented here describes a social phenomena which arises through relationships among power, place and race. The relative absence of Blacks from the lobby is an observable fact. Black people's relation to the University in general, and to Owen Center in particular, is observably different than that of other groups. It is my contention that a longer study along these same lines would support the notion

³ Stone, John. Racial Conflict in Contemporary Society. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985. p. 19.

that groups who identify with those who are predominantly in power are more likely to occupy spaces which are designated as "public."

A. The Setting

The dormitory, Owen Graduate Center, houses approximately 1,900 students, many of whom are foreign nationals. Intentionally or not, Owen has served as transitional housing. In many cases, international and domestic students are housed in Owen while they await housing in Spartan Village, University Village or Cherry Lane, the University's three apartment complexes. Broadly speaking, and if we accept the idea that matriculation through a major university such as Michigan State is a mechanism of social mobility, then we can state that the University is used as a path to larger, longer-term goals in the form of education, knowledge, university degrees, steady (tenured) employment, (grant motivated) self-employment, and generally higher salaries than those who hold only a high school diploma, or no diploma at all. Likewise, one of the functions of the lobby is as a thoroughfare to more specific goals: another room, the cafeteria, the front desk, front door, and exits.

According to one of my informants, because the rooms at Owen are so small, few people choose to live there for more

than a year.⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, that the transitional nature of the space loomed as a critical factor in the investigation. What had not yet been "discovered" was the role of this space for different segments of the Owen population, especially African-Americans.

This study was conducted during Spring Semester 1993. Owen Center is a seven-story, L-shaped brick building. The entire building, with the exception of the first floor of the west wing and four rooms of the second floor of the west wing, is residential. The first floor and the four rooms on the second story of the west wing house the offices of Urban Affairs Programs. The dormitory rooms at Owen Center are quite small, about 10' x 15', and are adjoined to another such room by a bathroom, which is shared by the occupants of the two rooms.

The lobby which was the setting for this data collection is located on the first floor of Owen Center. It is a public space, centrally located between the East and West residence wings of Owen Center. To go from one wing of the dormitory to the other, it is necessary to go either along the hallway that runs past the lobby area itself or cut across the lobby. The lobby area proper can be distinguished from the hall by the carpeting that covers the lobby and a three-and-one-half-foot wall that runs the partial length of the lobby.

⁴ Interview with former Owen resident "Kathy" in the lobby at Owen Hall, April 27, 1993.

The lobby can be looked at as desirable territory, in that it is centrally located and apparently intended for relative comfort. The area is carpeted and has eight banks of upholstered couches and chairs. The carpeted lobby is pleasantly decorated with decorative incandescent lights, rather than institutional fluorescent lights, coffee tables, end tables, and ashtrays. It is also a very open, airy space, with a wall of sliding glass doors that allow for maximum natural daylight. This area is in contradistinction to the corridor, which is a fluorescent-lit, uncarpeted linoleum floor that runs in a soft arc around three sides of the lobby and leads to and from the east and west residential wings, as well as the front desk, front and side doors, and the cafeteria that provides meals for Owen graduate students. Across the hall from the lobby is a stairway that leads downstairs to Owen's game room, TV's and laundry rooms. This downstairs area, set apart in the basement of Owen, is clearly not public. Besides limitations of access because of its physical positioning in the basement, Owen Residence Hall identification cards are required to gain access to the TV and game room, although not the laundry rooms.

Approximately a dozen people are employed by Owen Graduate Center. Among them are a daytime manager, five or six members of a maintenance staff, a front desk clerk and a cafeteria manager. These positions are full-time and are held by non-students and non-residents. However, some students are

also employed at Owen on a part-time basis. These part-time positions include maintenance and the front-desk clerk, and are held by Owen residents, as well as non-resident students.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Lobby as Public Space: Sociability and Passage

The area of observation in this study included the corridor and lobby (the lobby area). The lobby area at Owen Center is a public space. It is not behind doors, and there is no requirement that you show identification or be a member to enter. Entrance into the lobby itself is accomplished by merely stepping from the corridor onto the carpeted area that constitutes the lobby proper.

From my observation, the lobby at Owen appears to be a space that is used in one of two essential ways. First, it serves as a site for social interaction among individuals and groups. Second, it serves as a zone of passage. Thus, individuals and groups either assemble or use the area as a thoroughfare from one place to another. In general, these two aspects can be thought of as sociability and passage, and as such they represent two substantially different uses of the space. The sub-category "rendezvous" represents a sort of midway point between sociability and passage. Field notes indicate that people pass through the lobby and adjacent corridor (the lobby area) to and from all other areas in Owen, and that they also congregate for scheduled and impromptu meetings throughout the lobby area.



Passage: In the first set of notes from my observations, there are references to the lobby being "both a thoroughway and an area of relaxation." Although the conceptualization had not yet congealed, I noted early in my observations that there were those who made use of the comfort/relaxation element of this public space and those who only passed through it. An early set of notes from the field included an initial glimpse of the distinctions among populations in this transitional space. In fact, it is this transitional nature of the lobby as a passage that may most emphasize its public-ness. Visitors, residents, employees and construction workers from nearby on-campus construction make use of the lobby and corridors at Owen Center.

Sociability: Throughout my notes there is evidence that there are two basic types of sociability. The data indicates that the two most frequent forms are rendezvous and meeting. Lobby meetings occur for academic reasons, but more often for non-academic interaction (i.e., goofing off, chillin', hanging, kicking back). Rendezvous, on the other hand, can be seen as a midpoint between sociability and passage that is more transitional in nature, wherein groups meet and perhaps linger, but go elsewhere for their primary activity.

In general, for both groups and individuals, activities of sociability took place in the lobby, while activities of passage occurred in any of the lobby areas. For example, I noted a "marked contrast" in the tones of two different

conversations that were taking place simultaneously; one conversation was in the lobby between two people who were seated in one of the banks of seats, the other was between two people who were standing in the corridor adjacent to the carpeted area that constitutes the lobby. Of the two couples, only one occupied space in the lobby. I noted that the couple in the corridor, who were African-Americans, were speaking in hushed tones, almost as though they were telling each other secrets.

B. Individual and Group Sociability: Behaviors in the Lobby Area

Based on a cataloging of the people present in the lobby, and the nature of their social interactions, behaviors were broken down into several categories: studying, smoking, reading, eating, and talking/discussion. These categories have a clear relation to one another in that they all indicate a duration of stay in the lobby, which in terms of length of time tended to range from 3 to 60 minutes. Shortly after beginning my observations, the lobby area started to take on a particular shape. Watching the interactions, behaviors and traffic flow through the lobby of Owen Center, I soon recognized that movement through the space, and behavior within the space, marked a clear distinction in the meanings and use of that space. The lobby area was used by both individuals and groups. Individuals met and became groups,

collectives of individuals sat and talked, individuals sat and read newspapers, then joined other groups. Couples would smoke and talk. The levels of sociability ranged from two-person meetings to larger groups.

In general, my findings indicated that there seemed to be more people interacting during evening than daytime hours. Different days and times of day also reflected distinct types of behavior and "quality" of activities (waiting for laundry, waiting for food, reading, group conversations, passing greetings, comments and conversation, and academic meetings).

C. Racial Difference and the Using and Traversing of Public and Social Space

Data from this study indicated that there were significant differences in the use of the lobby according to race. Based on this study, there appears to be measurable differences in how people of African descent made use of this public space in contrast to other groups.

Table 1 shows the general classification of the sample according to space use. As one might expect, the majority of activity, nearly 80 percent, occurred in the lobby. As we can see, only 20 percent of the same made use of the corridor for passage or sociability.

Table 1: Classification of the Sample According to
Location, 1994

Location	Frequency	Percentage
Corridor	33	20.2
Lobby	130	79.8
TOTAL	163	100.0

The vast majority of activities catalogued occurred in the carpeted area of the lobby proper. Within the observable ranges of group and individual behavior, White residents of Owen spent more time, and longer periods of time, engaging in more diverse activities in the lobby. The range of behaviors which European-descent residents engaged in seemed to cover the spectrum of coded behaviors. From solitary, quiet introspection to a young woman's introduction to chewing tobacco by two young men, White students used the lobby area for a much wider range of behaviors.

Table 1A shows the racial distribution of the sample. As we see, Blacks made up 19 percent of the sample, which is considerably over-representative of their percentages of the population of both Michigan State University and the United States, where the percentages are 7.1 and 12.1, respectively. Whites, who represented 43.0 percent of the sample are 79.9 and 80.3 percent, respectively, of the Michigan State University's and the United States' population. So that although Whites are the vast majority of the population of the

United States and MSU, they represented only 43.0 percent of the observed users of Owen lobby.

Table 1A: Distribution of Sample According to Race, 1994

	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Total
Frequency	54	32	7	54	163
Percent	33.1	19.6	4.3	43.0	100.0

Asian students, who made up 33.1 percent of the sample, also engaged in a fairly wide range of behaviors.

Most notable, because of its virtual pariah status, was the consistent use of the lobby for smoking. An interesting future study might include research on the range of behaviors in public spaces among different groups.

Table 2 shows that among racially differentiated groups, there is a notable difference in their frequency of lobby usage. Of the four differentiated groups, the Hispanic and Asian students made the most consistent and exclusive use of the lobby proper. All of the Hispanic interactions and 94.4 percent of the interactions of Asians occurred in the lobby. For Black and White students, the usage of the lobby and corridor showed a highly differential use of space *vis-a-vis* each other. While 87.1 percent of the interactions of White students occurred within the lobby, 39.4 percent of the Black students' interactions did so. The majority of Black students

Table 2: Lobby Area Usage According to Race, 1994

Race	Lobby		Corridor		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Black	11	34.3	21	65.6	32	100
Asian	51	9 .4	3	5.6	54	100
Hispanic	7	100.0	-	-	7	100
White	61	87.1	9	12.9	70	100
TOTAL	130	79.8	33	20.2	163	100

used the corridor rather than the lobby for passage and sociability.

Within my first few trips to the field, as I observed the range of behaviors of those sitting around me, I noted the absence of Black people, and so the parameters of this study began to emerge. What became clear was that African-descent students made little or no use of the lobby itself. For example, I noted that, "Black students don't seem to congregate in the lobby," and "I have yet to see an African student using this area as a meeting, waiting, or resting area," and yet notes still indicate that "the lobby is a very public place." The majority of prolonged interactions among Black Owen residents occurred in the hallway area and not in the lobby proper, as Table 2 shows.

Throughout the period of observation, there was only one occasion of prolonged lobby usage by Black people, most of whom appeared to be non-residents. The use of the lobby area by a large group of Black people occurred in the context of a rendezvous. The group was attending a conference on the campus of Michigan State. As they waited, these Black people, wearing name tags and carrying identical green folders, milled through the lobby and corridors, alone and in groups. Even though this interaction occurred, it was uncharacteristic in that these people had entered the space as part of an organized usage. Even in that context, for these African-Americans, their lobby

usage was more as a midpoint rendezvous than as an area of sociability.

This mass of people moving as they are seem almost organic. They are like a living organism. It is as though each person is in reaction to those they are near. Some follow, some break off of groups they are with, some stand up, but virtually everyone is in some sort of motion.¹

So, except in cases of planned and organized or invitational usage, Black students tended to use the corridor rather than the lobby of Owen Center.

¹ Field Notes. Observation set 6, page 3. February 20, 1993.



V. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

A. Circumscribed Space

As stated previously, public spaces exist within social spaces and are to one degree or another, and in one way or another, circumscribed by that social context. Owen Center exists within the social space of Michigan State University. The public-ness of the lobby in Owen Center seems to be circumscribed in three distinct ways. First, the public-ness of the lobby in Owen Center is circumscribed by the social parameters of the University at large. Clearly the vast majority of the population to be found on the campus of MSU on any given day are affiliated with the University as students or employees. The University is a public space which is open to the public, but which is circumscribed by other factors, foremost among them being University affiliation, which seems to keep the non-affiliated community from coming to the campus in any significant number without explicit invitation. At no time during my observations did I see or note anyone in the lobby who did not seem to belong, in some way, to the University community. During my observations there were no obviously homeless people, no evidently poor or working-class people in the lobby or corridor of Owen. The University is not a place where the general public roams around. It is a public

space, and yet only that distinct segment of the population who have a direct connection to the University is usually present.

Next, the lobby of Owen Center is sometimes circumscribed by organized and planned use of the space, as in the various "ethnic nights" which occur in Owen's lobby. I noted that:

It is common in Owen to find committees being formed for the purposes of Ethnic nights, or other thematic public festivities. There has been an Asian Night, an African Bazaar, various types of multiethnic performances. Sometimes they happen in the basement rooms and sometimes right in the lobby.

These ethnic nights represent a nuanced departure from the usual circumscriptions of the space. Under conditions of the ethnic nights or other planned or organized utilizations of the lobby area for approved workshops and seminars, there is a recognizably different dimension of public-ness. In these cases there is a dimension of invitation which would need to be considered. In the cases of advertised or organized events where residents and others are publicly informed of an event in a University building, virtually all of the University campus becomes public for the duration of the event. The campus at large and, in this case, Owen's lobby areas in particular, become differently bounded as public space.

Finally, there is some indication that the public-ness of the lobby is circumscribed by individual assessments. As such,

it is public space that is subject to rules of the nearest authority.

An anecdotal report in a phone interview with a former Michigan State graduate student indicates this sort of circumscription of the lobby. Myra is a Black woman of about 32 years of age. She was a graduate student in American Studies and a Teaching Assistant in the History Department. As such, she was often up late, and preferred to grade papers and study from late at night until morning whenever possible. She shared an apartment with two other graduate students and often studied in restaurants, dorm lobbies, or other "public" spaces. Her description of an incident in Owen Hall points out some of the several parameters which circumscribe the publicness, or the use of the lobby, of Owen Center as a "public" space.

One night during finals week, a few terms ago, I was studying in the cafeteria of Owen late into the night. I was studying there because I could stay up late without disturbing anyone, and because I was too broke to go to a restaurant. At about 3 or 4 that morning I started to get very tired and moved out to the lobby, where I stretched out on one of the couches. I was only there for about 15 minutes when the Manager of Owen came. He woke me up, and made me give him identification that I was a student. Then he asked if I lived in Owen. When I said I didn't, he told me I would have to leave. I tried to tell him I had no way to get home at that hour, and that I needed to study. He told me I could stay sitting upright in the cafeteria if I wanted, but that I could not sleep in the lobby.¹

¹ Phone interview with Myra Martin at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. April 25, 1993.

We see from this that at least for some hours, the population and their use of Owen's lobby is circumscribed. This incident is illustrative of a circumscription according to subjective judgment. Whether Myra was judged by her appearance, which was typically quite casual, or even a little scruffy, or because she was Black, or a woman, or too tall, or because this manager believed that sleeping is a private behavior which should only occur in private, is a matter for speculation. What is public space and who the public are may be mitigated or circumscribed by individual, perhaps even idiosyncratic, tastes, preferences and interpretations in any given situation.

B. Place and Power: Occupation and Utilization of Space

The decision to problematize the absence of African-Americans in the lobby of Owen Center is predicated on the idea that public spaces may not be accessible to the "public" whom they intend to serve. As part of a historical legacy, African-Americans are usually aware that this society has often "brutally prohibited blacks from participating in and partaking of the 'public sphere.'"²

"Brutal prohibition" is indicative of one group's degree of power over another. Most of all it implies a relationship. The ability to prohibit anything to a group of people, let

² Jefferies, John. "Toward a Redefinition of the Urban." in Black Popular Culture. Gina Dent (ed.). Seattle: Bay Press, 1992. p. 160.

alone to prohibit it brutally, implies a relation of subordination/domination, and domination is a demonstration of power. It follows then that the explicit and implicit control of space, and the regulation of which groups may and may not use or occupy a given space, are exercises of power. Legally, segregation is prohibited. However, the historical nature of race relations tells another story. In many ways, integration is part mythology. One cannot ignore some of the fundamental aspects of identity and place that have fueled conflicts, including the current one among Moslem, Serbian and Croatian people in Eastern Europe. The premises for all civil actions on the behalf of Black people have been predicated on the belief that Black people's involvement in civil life can be legislated into being commensurate in opportunity and practice with that of the White population within the U.S. While in fact all citizens in the United States are equal under the law, there are nuanced differences in spheres of daily living, where the initial and subsequent design and orientation of services and spaces reflect cultural processes which are significantly different from at least some of the public whom they serve.

These public services and spaces are individually and collectively representative of the larger social exclusions that are sociocultural and, therefore, implicitly, rather than explicitly, political. The differential use of Owen's lobby may be indicative of the differential accessibility of other

services, opportunities and places which are ostensibly "public." Public-ness is predicated on access. Access is predicated on an awareness (or verstehen) of oneself as having the privileges which commonly accrue with citizenship or other forms of political and social inclusion. Yet, when historical memory and social conditions coincide to limit this sense of awareness, access and public-ness both become problematized.

Use and occupation of public space in the United States has, until 30 years ago, been constrained and proscribed by individuals and groups. It is safe to assume that what occurred as a process emerging out of at least two centuries of systematic limitations on physical and social mobility, as well as on the use and occupation of space, would not and could not be reversed over only three decades. Moreover, the question remains whether, over time and through redundancy, those relations of "strangerness" which were imposed through, among other things, the use and occupation of public places, have been reified in space such that those social relations govern the use of public space in the United States today.

C. Legacies of Power

The range of behaviors described for the public usage of Owen Graduate Center's lobby area represents a range of sociability within and between groups and individuals in that context, and perhaps in a larger community as well, whether MSU, East Lansing or Michigan. Moreover, ever-changing



boundaries of identity which mediate the use of public spaces may emerge from various aspects of "strangerness." Again, Anthony King is instructive when he says:

To understand any built environment we need to understand the economic, social, and political formations on which it is based; we need to understand both a social and a spatial division of labor.³

Stranger relations have alchemized out of a social and spatial division of labor and may be manifest in the use of public space by African-descent people. For this reason, it is important to note that students of European heritage tended to occupy the lobby, while people of African descent merely passed through it. The social dynamics of strangerness are born out of a social identity rooted in the position of "otherness." This particular set of boundaries was constructed out of a social history of prolonged legal and material non-incorporation into the United States' economy and body politic. Moreover, those boundaries help circumscribe the behaviors and use of physical space, as much as they help delineate identity and social location.

The differential use of the space by Asian students represents a departure from the rest of the data. Notes reveal that the vast majority of the Asian students whom I observed in the lobby were men. They also had two other things in common as well: these men smoked and were international

³ King, p. 406.

students. Unlike Asian-Americans, African-Americans, or European Americans, international students are able to operate without the burdens of the particular social histories which various segments of the domestic population carry and which inform their cultural lives.

The data showed that people of European and Asian descent tended to occupy the lobby, while people of African descent passed through the lobby and sometimes occupied the corridor. Interviews indicated one reason for this may be that Black students have an intuitive, as well as explicit, understanding of themselves as a numerical minority.⁴ One informant indicated that she estimated Owen's Black population as being "no more than 5 percent."⁵ With an image of oneself as a minority population, and a known history of marginalization, segregation and violence, it is reasonable to think that some sort of self-consciousness could arise. Seeing oneself defined by others through history may have created a self-consciousness, like the seeming self-consciousness which is implicit in the statement, "Black people don't like having whites around when we socialize." Whether that reluctance grows out of a historical legacy, or whether it is a consequence of more contemporary experiential knowledge, or both, the sentiment expresses a clear hesitancy to "socialize"

⁴ According to the Manager of Owen Center, no data on the racial composition of the dorm is collected.

⁵ Interview with Staff Assistant, Charity, at Owen Graduate Center Offices, April 27, 1993.

openly around their White counterparts. The reticence to expose too much smacks of deep suspicion. There is an indication of a sort of siege mentality, born out of the assumption that one is not fully physically or socially secure.

One Black woman, who was a former Owen resident, was quite clear. When asked if she liked being at MSU, she said:

It's alright. I like to take the best of a place. I look for what's good about it. It's peaceful here. But not enough Black people. I'm used to being around Black people.⁶

In the U.S. today, most Black people still live in segregated neighborhoods and attend segregated schools and, as a consequence, interactions between Black and White youth are probably not a daily occurrence. MSU's Black population is part of the larger Black population of the United States and, as such, it is likely that many of MSU's Black population have grown up such that traveling through White neighborhoods means being alert, being aware of their surroundings and where they are *vis-a-vis* other groups. Incidents at both Jones Beach and in Bensonhurst, New York, demonstrate the potential consequences when one group crosses the boundary of another, irrespective of the type of boundary. For many Black students, going to MSU may be equivalent to going into a white neighborhood. It is best to exercise caution. In this sense,

⁶ Interview with former Owen resident, "Kathy." Owen lobby. April 27, 1993.

MSU can be understood as a microcosm of the larger U.S. society.

D. Social Boundaries

The relations among public space, identity and culture loom important in the face of social science and cultural studies discourse around nationality, localism and globalism. Anthony King has gone so far as to say that:

the built environment, building and urban form in all their conceptualizations, do not just represent, or reflect social order, they actually constitute much of social and cultural existence.⁷

To account for the distinct use of Owen Center among the racially diverse population, several issues are crucial. Just as is the case with the United States population, the Black population at Michigan State University is a numerical minority. The Spring 1993 *Enrollment Highlights*, published by the Office of the Registrar at MSU, reports that the student population of MSU for Spring 1993 was 37,829. Of these students, 79.9 percent were White, 2.3 percent Hispanic, American Indian or Alaskan Aleut, 2.8 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7.1 percent were Black. Although represented in greater numbers than Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Island students, Black students on the campus of MSU are a numerical minority *vis-a-vis* Whites.

⁷ King, Anthony. p. 404.

It is the state of social minorities, however, which concerns us here. We can see manifestations of the social diminution of Black people by the fact that within the United States, people of African descent continue to live in segregated neighborhoods, attend resource poor segregated schools, and are disproportionately represented in the prison population. These things reflect some of the social boundaries of minority-ness which are demonstrated through the use of some public space.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The notions of boundaries and occupation are crucial to this study, in that boundaries and occupation are primary constructions in issues of identity and territory. History indicates that the control or occupation of space is a basis for power. Through this study, then, we can begin to understand some of the calculus of boundaries of identity and place which might be fundamental to questions of access and power.

This research has supported the notion that identity and territory intersect in a way that may expose aspects, if not levels, of social distance, which may, in turn, play out in the use of public space. An idiosyncratic circumscription of the usage of public space for this distinct segment of the United States' population may indicate that despite legal integration, and even among upwardly mobile segments of the Black population, there remains a lack of substantial social integration.

Follow-up research that might further delineate the use of public facilities might have implications for future policy or other social change as pertains to inclusion and diversity.

One fact is clear from these observations: Black residents of Owen Hall make little or no use of the lobby at

Owen Graduate Center. This assertion has been confirmed by the data and all informants. Ultimately, boundaries of identity and race help to explain the differential use of space by Black Owen graduates. To the extent that Black students identify more with the smaller Owen or MSU Black population, they distinguish themselves from the general Owen Graduate Center and MSU populations. In Anthony Cohen's discussion of the Symbolic Construction of Community, he addresses the occupancy of someone else's social space in the context of a "mental construct." He says,

if outsiders trespass in that space, then its occupants' own sense of self is felt to be debased and defaced. The sense is always tenuous when the physical and structural boundaries which previously divided the community from the rest of the world are blurred.¹

Perhaps that is the state of African-American social integration. If so, then perhaps the non-use of space in Owen is merely a phase in the United States' emergence as a nation that reflects a mosaic of communities which feature individual integrity, flexibility, social justice and self-determination as their hallmarks.

¹ Cohen, Anthony P. The Symbolic Construction of Community. Sussex, England: Horwood/Tavistock Publications, 1985. p. 109.

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