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Reflections on Bell's *Hate Thy Neighbor*

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Jeanine Bell's Hate Thy Neighbor: Move In Violence and the Persistence of Racial Segregation in American Housing *offers an in-depth look at the central role that violence has and continues to play in maintaining segregated housing patterns*.

Real estate in the San Francisco Bay Area is notoriously expensive. Some years ago during the height of the prerecession real estate boom, one of my friend's favorite hobbies was to search online for houses listed for sale for more than $1 million in the tech-rich South Bay that were so dilapidated that he would never consider living in them. Needless to say, he found several candidates that were truly awful—so called "teardowns." And many of these houses sold for substantially above the asking price.

One unexpected outcome of the economic downturn of 2008 and 2009 was that for those who had some savings and were not entirely risk averse, homes could be purchased in neighborhoods that may have otherwise been out of reach. My partner and I were fortunate to be able to do this, and we purchased a house in a neighborhood that would be difficult for us to buy in if we tried to do it today.

What we did not know at the time that we purchased the house is that, as a black couple, we were essentially integrating the neighborhood. We were and continue to be the only black people that we know of for many blocks. Official neighborhood statistics show that there are other blacks in our zip code. However, after living here for over six years, we have no idea where the next black family lives. Not a clue.

When we first moved in, this led to a series of interesting interactions. On a few occasions, when I opened the door to greet the cable guy or repairman, they would stare at me with a puzzled look and ask: "Are *you* the owner of this house?" As people who routinely service the neighborhood, the implication behind these questions was clear: black people don't live here.

But suspicion about our presence did not only come from outsiders who visited the neighborhood to provide services, but also our neighbors. My partner walked out our front door one day and an older white woman stopped her and asked: "Do you live here or are you just looking after this house?"—implying that a black woman who is seen frequently going in and out is likely to only be "the Help." On another occasion, a neighbor who was curious about our property rang our doorbell

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at 8:30 on a Sunday morning. When I answered the door, she jumped back with a startled look and asked: "Do you live here?" It is unclear who she expected to answer the door at that time of day.

Despite these interactions, our overall experience has been fine. We have made several friends, and we enjoy the community. But the microaggressions that we have experienced are linked to (yet clearly pale in comparison) an experience with deep roots in the United States: whites expressing anti-integrationist sentiments as a way to maintain housing segregation. For my partner and me, the anti-integrationist vibes directed toward us were symbolic and nonthreatening, such as prolonged looks of suspicion and thinly veiled questions about our presence in the neighborhood that other homeowners do not receive. However, for many other minorities, the anti-integrationist sentiment that they experience is anything but symbolic and veers quickly toward physical violence. This persisting dynamic of anti-integrationism and the use of violence to maintain racial boundaries is taken up by Jeannine Bell in her book *Hate Thy Neighbor: Move In Violence and the Persistence of Racial Segregation in American Housing*.

Bell traces the law, history, and psyche that leads people to resist neighborhood integration to the point of using violence. Housing segregation and move in violence are complicated phenomena that do not track the racial progress seen in other areas of law and society. This is what makes the subject matter so important. Housing—like interracial dating and church membership—involves a certain level of intimacy that resists the niceties of racial reconciliation that society professes in other areas. Thus, what Bell so clearly gets at is the extent to which anti-integrationism speaks to deeper sensibilities about white identity and racial privilege.

From this vantage point, Bell's look at neighborhood violence seems to be less about the economics of anti-integration and more about the preservation of whiteness. Bell begins this conversation in the first two chapters, where she places contemporary articulations of move in violence in a historical context. She traces the evolution of housing patterns from post Civil War dynamics (where there was a certain level of proximity in black/white living situations) to the rise of Jim Crow and formal legal mechanisms that spatially segregated different racial communities. Bell describes how various legal decisions and policy preferences created the conditions for sequestering minorities to the least desirable properties, providing the means for whites to build communities with the resources to lead productive lives. Thus, the early chapters in *Hate Thy Neighbor* demonstrate that existing housing conditions are not a product of individual market choices or simple group preferences. Rather, law and public policy designed these specific outcomes, creating value in whites' properties and a sense that such value is tied to racial exclusion. This produced economic and psychological incentives for violence to be used to maintain both a sense of self and a sense of home equity.

Bell develops and explores this idea of move in violence—violent acts directed toward minorities who dared to traverse the neighborhood color line—and how such seemingly spontaneous individual and community acts of hate and violence were incentivized by state action. This includes policies of the Federal Housing Administration in the early to mid twentieth century that played a significant role in creating the wealth behind the then-emerging white middle class by

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guaranteeing housing loans.[1] Bell draws upon the stories of numerous victims of move in violence to examine how racial minorities continue to be subject to violence for attempting to cross established spatial boundaries marking where certain people could live. She acknowledges that the motivations for this type of move in violence are varied and complex. Move in violence does not simply concern eccentric whites with long histories of explicit racial hatred. Rather, perpetrators seem to be ordinary people who, when confronted with the possibility of a having neighbors of color, seek to defend their white identity—and property values as established through discriminatory practices and policies—through the otherwise uncharacteristic use of violence.

In this way, Bell's book makes an important contribution to the literature on studies of whiteness. Whiteness scholars such as Matthew Frye Jacobsen (1999), David Roediger (2007), and Barbara Flagg (1992) have shown how sociological and literary interventions regarding the social construction of race not only explain the subordinating experiences of racial minorities, but also the *superordinating* experiences of whites—that is, how white racial identity becomes normalized as superior in everyday life. Central to this idea of whiteness is that the concept is not simply about individual beliefs or animus but about group ideologies that structure normative assumptions about proper social relations. Put differently, whiteness as an ideology can allow individuals to consciously reject racial discrimination yet participate in activities that affirm the privileges associated with status quo racial dynamics. Issues of housing and neighborhoods have historically been ground zero for this dynamic to play itself out, as Bell discusses. *Hate Thy Neighbor* uses the context of neighborhood violence to highlight another important argument that whiteness scholars have made: that whiteness and white racial identity are constituted by delusions of purity. This idealized notion of white racial purity provides a baseline for what is thought to be good or right in society, which can motivate anger or hatred when such norms are violated through the perceived impurities of neighborhood integration.

Bell highlights this dynamic of idealized whiteness in the context of neighborhood violence and how it both reflects and reinforces existing notions of racial hierarchy. She complements and extends Cheryl Harris's groundbreaking work that positions whiteness as a form of property (Harris 1993). Harris suggests that whiteness has material value not unlike other forms of property. And like property, the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion regarding racial identity—who benefits and who is excluded—are just as consequential. Interestingly, *Hate Thy Neighbor* encourages us to flip this idea and to think of *property as whiteness*—that is, how real estate and spatial segregation based on notions of white purity can be constitutive aspects of white racial identity itself. Thus, when these white spaces face the possibility of integration, it can have a destabilizing effect on how some whites view themselves—particularly when the self-ordained sense of power and privilege is based on a racial antisepticism most emphatically seen during the Eugenics movement, where

1. FHA policies were explicitly designed to deny loans to black people and properties in black neighborhoods, providing strong signals to the private lending sector as well as laypersons about which people and which types of properties were "good investments." While these polices formally ended in the late 1960s, their impact continues to reverberate and compound—particularly with regard to the large wealth gap between blacks and whites (Coates 2014).

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interracial intimacy was considered a death sentence for human civilization (Black 2004). Thus, Bell's work allows us to see how the lashing out associated with housing integration is less about perceived declines in home equity (as often articulated) and more about the value of white identity, where the privileges of whiteness are inextricably linked to spatial segregation.

To put a finer point on the social and psychological dimensions of move in violence, consider the ironic tension between fears espoused by anti-integrationist whites and the means used to fend off minorities. Throughout the book, Bell recounts harrowing stories of minorities being subjected to violent acts after integrating a neighborhood. Crosses were burned in people's yards, people were physically attacked and harassed with racial slurs, and the houses that minorities lived in were burned to the ground. This was done all under the pretense that the mere presence of black people would destroy a neighborhood's prestige and, most importantly, property values. That is, anti-integrationist violence is justified by the idea that existing residents just want to maintain their "good" neighborhoods and, more importantly, their individual investments in their homes.

Bell sees this as a truly ironic situation: if anti-integrationist violence is motivated largely by concerns over property values, how is it that perpetrators think that the mere presence of blacks will devalue their property more so than establishing a neighborhood reputation for vigilantism? Put another way, who would voluntarily move to a neighborhood where people burn down each other's houses if they do not like one another? If the concern is that blacks bring the so-called violence and dysfunction of urban America with them when they move to white neighborhoods, does it make sense to address this fear of violence by using violence? Bell's discussion provides an excellent example of how the thin veneer of economic rationality that surrounds anti-integrationist sentiment—the proverbial "I'm not racist, but other people's racism affects my property value"—quickly buckles to reveal the extent to which protecting an imaginary unadulterated notion of whiteness drives much of the anti-integrationist angst surrounding move in violence.

It is therefore worth asking: what's the solution? Bell offers some thoughts on how to curb anti-integrationist violence. She provides a vision for a future of not only aesthetically diverse neighborhoods, but what she calls "complete integration" where "minorities and whites do not just live together, but also have interaction." Bell describes this as:

> the difference between schools that have integrated classrooms, where minorities and whites sit side by side and work together on activities, and schools where tracking means that minority students see the other students only in the cafeteria and on the sports field. (206)

She continues:

> By meaningful interaction, I mean real interracial interaction: talking to each other, worshipping together, sharing stories, and connecting. This requires integrating a variety of spaces that are currently separate.... Pushing through our fears is the only way we can break through the

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> barrier to full integration and become the society that America claims it wants to be. (207)

Complete integration is certainly a laudable idea, but it is useful to look at this from the standpoint of classic critical race pessimism (concerning the centrality of race/racism to law and society) as a way to explore Bell's concept. Given what some have called the permanence of racism as a social and political force in society (D. Bell 1993), is complete integration and the type of meaningful interaction championed by Bell even possible? And, to push this line of critique even further in a critical race direction, is complete integration even desirable?

It seems that Bell's ultimate goal is to dismantle reservoirs of white privilege that have allowed anti-integrationist neighborhood violence to persist in modern times. Yet just as school integration has not necessarily resolved racial inequalities in education, resisting neighborhood segregation is likely to require solutions beyond voluntary associations based on housing. If whiteness is property and property is in a sense at the heart of whiteness, the power and value of those aspects of white racial identity that depend on excluding people of color are wholly illegitimate and need careful attention and deliberation in the name of social and racial justice.

Precisely how to do this is a question that requires serious deliberation. *Hate Thy Neighbor* provides an excellent starting point for this difficult conversation.

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