

## Being feared: masculinity and race in public space

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**Abstract.** Research on fear of crime typically examines the perceptions of those who fear, emphasizing women's experiences of vulnerability in public space. In this paper, I invert this practice to examine instead men's experiences of *being feared* in public spaces. Drawing on interviews with 82 male college students, I use a social constructionist approach to examine how men's experiences of being feared interact with men's formation of racial identities and the racialization of public places. Fear is a key mechanism for justifying and maintaining race privilege and exclusion. The experience and interpretation of being feared (or not feared) in public space intersects with men's construction of gender and race identities, and the ways that men assign racial meanings to public places. This paper examines these processes and proposes strategies for challenging fear and the exclusion it supports.

### Introduction

“Other persons never see the world from my perspective, and in witnessing the other's objective grasp of my body, actions, and words, I am always faced with an experience of myself different from the one I have.”

Young (1990a, page 231)

I began this study to better understand men's experiences of public space. For several years, I have studied women's fear in public space. By 'public spaces', I refer loosely to that category of generally accessible places outside of the home, which are used on a temporary basis (after Franck and Paxson, 1989). It is possible to say, without exaggeration, that fear in public space is a common experience for many women in the USA, one with profound impacts for women's lives. I have investigated the implications of fear for different groups of women, including mostly white college students in the Midwest USA; and for black, white, and Latina women of varied ages in Orange County, California. I examined fear as it shaped women's use and experience of college campuses and of public spaces like bookstores and coffee shops. I have been especially interested in fear as a form of social control over women's use of public space, and in the intersections between the location and meaning of fear and women's race and class identities (Day, 1994; 1995; 1997; 1999a; 1999b; 1999c).

That women chiefly feared *men* (rather than other women) was so universal among women I interviewed as to almost pass without mention. Increasingly, however, I wondered about men's reactions to being feared. Were men in public spaces conscious of being feared by women? Did men notice the signals of fear that women reported—the quickened steps, furtive glances, and keys held ready to wield as weapons? If so, what did men make of this? How were men's behaviors and their perceptions—of public spaces, of women, and of themselves— influenced by being the objects of others' fear?

In this paper, I adopt a social constructionist approach to investigate men's experiences of being feared in public spaces. In geography and related fields, social constructionism involves the “interrogation of the formation of sociospatial meaning” (Bonnett, 1996, page 872). I apply this perspective to examine men's experiences of

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being feared and their interpretations of these experiences, and the consequences of being feared for men's lives.

Researchers have long studied fear and its negative impacts for those who fear (see Koskela, 1997; Pain, 1991; Valentine, 1990, 1992). The experience and implications of *being feared* have received less attention, however, apart from some powerful personal accounts (see Ellis, 1995; Kelley, 1988) and a broader geographical literature on exclusion (see Iveson, 2003; Sibley, 1995, 2001). This paper examines men's experiences of being feared in public spaces, drawing on findings from interviews with 82 undergraduate male students at the University of California, Irvine. Male college students were selected for the study because this group was readily accessible and, as importantly, because it is high school and college age men who are typically linked with danger in the media and in crime statistics. It is these young men who are most often feared, according to existing research (discussed later).

A pilot study revealed wide divergence in young men's experiences of being feared in public spaces. Not surprisingly, men's experiences of being feared were shaped by their racial identities and by the meanings assigned to these identities. Much research on women's fear treats men as a fairly homogeneous group, beyond noting that it is certain types of men (young and black or Latino) that women especially fear (see Day, 1999a; 1999c; Gordon and Riger, 1989; Koskela, 1997). And yet, this approach regards men as equal in their share of power in public space, which is not true. Further, by ignoring men's specific identities, we miss the fact that women's and men's identities are not distinct but interdependent. They are constructed interactively, including through the use of public space (Jackson, 1991; Ruddick, 1996). Thus, I sharpened the focus of the study to deal less with 'men' as an undifferentiated group, and more with the role of racial identity in men's experiences of being feared.

As I argue in this paper, *the experience and interpretation of being feared (or not feared) in public space intersects with men's construction of gender and race identities, and the ways that men assign racial meanings to public places*. As such, the question of how men experience being feared acquires broad societal significance. In this paper I expand our understanding of a key mechanism (that is, fear) by which race privilege and exclusion are maintained and justified, and propose strategies for challenging fear and exclusion.

### **The social construction of race in research on place**

The term 'social constructionist' encompasses a broad range of research, which examines how various categories of meaning, such as race, are constructed (Bonnett, 1996). Such research rejects the notion of categories like race as 'natural'.

"Social construction theory argues that many of the categories that we have come to consider 'natural', and hence immutable, can be more accurately (and more usefully) viewed as the product of processes which are embedded in human actions and choices... [and later]. The social construction perspective works by identifying the components and processes of category construction. The resultant knowledge can then be used to reconstruct categories in ways which allow their inherent power to be used in the pursuit of equality" (Jackson and Penrose, 1993, pages 2–3).

Nash (2003) expands further, describing social constructionism as

"anti essentialist perspectives on race which seek to deconstruct race as a 'naturalized' hierarchy of biologically distinctive human groups, while exploring processes of racialization which place individuals and groups within racial categories and have material effects in terms of the unequal distribution of power and wealth" (page 639).

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Bonnett (1996) provides a framework that situates social constructionism as the most recent of several contemporary geographical approaches to the study of race, and the prevailing approach in geography today. Bonnett distinguishes social constructionism from earlier approaches to the study of geography and race, in which race is treated as a real and fixed characteristic.

In contrast with earlier approaches, social constructionists typically examine racism and its geographical ramifications, rather than 'race' *per se* (Bonnett, 1996). Social constructionist research often investigates how places are assigned racial meanings (Nash, 2003). Studies also explore how racial groups make decisions within the context of racially interactive processes such as discrimination and assimilation. Social constructionist research acknowledges that race is often constructed in ways that make the current arrangements of power appear 'natural' (Bederman, 1995; Nash, 2003). Researchers interrogate the reasons and conditions under which race is constructed to support these inequitable arrangements (Miles, 1989; in Jackson and Penrose, 1993).

Social constructionists do not interrogate all categories with equal vigor. As Bonnett (1996) argues, social constructionists often exempt from critique such 'progressive' categories as equality and racism, trying instead to fix the meanings of these categories to support the researchers' political goals. A more useful approach would interrogate the meanings of categories such as race privilege and fear.

Fear in public spaces is a key mechanism through which race privilege is constructed. Fear of racialized others serves to maintain and justify exclusion and race oppression. As I discuss, men's experiences of being and not being feared in public space, and their interpretations of those experiences, contribute to the construction of men's racial identities and to men's understandings of race and racism more broadly. In interpreting their experiences of being feared, men attempt to negotiate the boundaries of exclusion that are tied to identity. They exercise control over how they are perceived by others and seek opportunities for themselves. In their efforts, young men may deny, rationalize, accommodate, or resist others' fear in public space, each of which has implications for the maintenance of race privilege. The following sections explore these themes in greater detail.

## Methods

Findings derive from interviews of 82 male college students at the University of California, Irvine. Students received course credit, typically in large introductory courses, for participating in the study. The men I interviewed ranged in age from 18 to 36 years, with a median age of 20 years. My intention was to examine the intersections of men's racial/ethnic identities and their experiences of being feared. In a one-page survey that accompanied interviews, male students were asked to identify themselves in terms of their racial/ethnic identities. A wide array of overlapping and disjointed categories of racial/ethnic/geographical identities were offered, to accommodate the disparate ways men might conceive of their identities. Men were invited to describe themselves using all categories that fit their definitions of their own racial/ethnic identities, and to add other categories as needed. In response, men identified themselves as Asian/Asian American (24), white/Anglo/Caucasian (15), Hispanic/Latino/Chicano (11), Middle Eastern (8), black/African-American/African (4), Pacific Islander (4), South Asian/Indian (3), and other (4). Nine additional participants identified themselves as belonging to multiple groups.

Prior to beginning this study, an undergraduate research assistant completed a pilot study involving brief, in-person interviews with 18 male students. For the study itself, I conducted semistructured interviews with all participants. Interviews lasted

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30–45 minutes on average. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through qualitative content analysis involving iterative stages of detailed coding and interpretative memos (after Patton, 1990).

In the interviews, men were asked about their feelings of fear and safety in public spaces, and their experiences of being feared by others. In particular, they were asked whether and where they had ever experienced fear in public space, and where and when they felt safe. In interviews, I asked men to respond to a series of hypothetical scenarios, which they could choose to interpret as instances in which strangers were or were not fearful of them. Each scenario was designed so that it might have multiple interpretations. I read the scenarios to the men in a neutral voice, and then asked for their possible interpretations. For example, one scenario asked each man to imagine that he and a group of his friends entered an elevator at a shopping mall, after which the sole occupant—an older, Asian American woman—immediately left the elevator. Men were asked to provide possible interpretations of each scenario. They were also asked whether any such experience had ever happened to them and, if so, how they had interpreted it. I then asked men directly whether they might have interpreted the scenario in the interview as an instance in which the stranger described was afraid of them, and asked men to explain their interpretations. Other interview questions asked men to discuss any times they had been conscious of being feared by strangers in public space and their interpretations of those experiences. Findings speak most centrally to the experiences of college-age men in postsuburban Southern California. Many findings are also relevant to the experiences of college-age men elsewhere in the USA and in other Western countries.

The fact of being interviewed by a white woman in her mid-thirties had bearing on the information men divulged, and the ways they chose to present themselves as men during interviews. In interviews, I introduced myself by first and last name, and stated that I was interested in men's uses of and feelings about public spaces. Throughout interviews, I did not attempt to encourage men to answer in particular ways, and was accepting of all responses. To some men, I may have appeared to be a professor (which I was) or authority figure, and their responses may have been guided by trying to give the 'right' or 'politically correct' response. For others, my apparent age may have indicated more of a 'peer-group' status, and their responses may have been intended to impress, shock, or solidify that connection. Men who identified themselves and me as white may have neglected to address the significance of white race identity in their experiences in public space, assuming that we had similar understandings that required no elaboration. At the same time, some men of color may have elected to minimize the significance of racism in their lives to avoid being labeled as 'whiners' who blamed racism for their troubles (Feagin, 1991), or to spare my feelings of guilt for their experiences. In general, my stranger status and my reluctance to proffer my own views on race likely tempered men's responses on these sensitive topics.

### **The context**

Orange County, the site of this study, is located in Southern California, midway between Los Angeles and San Diego. Outsiders know Orange County for its affluence and its conservative politics. Originally more of a suburb of Los Angeles, Orange County often prefers to think of itself as separate and superior to Los Angeles in terms of safety, prosperity, and quality of life (Soja, 1992). This distinction is blurring somewhat as Orange County becomes more highly urbanized. In the national and regional imagination, however, Orange County remains linked with archetypical suburban living, political conservatism, and shopping malls for the well-heeled (Blakely and Snyder, 1997; McGirr, 2002; Soja, 1992; Sorkin, 1992).

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Orange County residents are diverse overall, but communities are segregated. According to census data from 2000, of the nearly three million Orange County residents, 65% are white, 14% are Asian American, and 2% are black (US Bureau of the Census, 2000). 15% of residents identify themselves as some other race. Additionally, 31% of residents identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Residents are unevenly divided into the less populated, wealthier, and 'whiter' South County, and the poorer, more populated, and more racially and ethnically diverse North County.

The city of Irvine sits in the center of postsuburban Orange County. Incorporated in 1971, Irvine (population 143 000) is one of the largest planned communities in the USA. Irvine residents identify themselves as white (65%), Asian (32%), and black (2%); 7% of Irvine residents are Hispanic (US Bureau of the Census, 2000). Irvine is an affluent city. Residents' median household income was over US \$72 000 in 2000. The city is known for its strict control over urban design and for its reputation as one of the safest cities of its size in the nation (Garvin, 1996; Kelley, 1994; Savageau and Loftus, 1997; Soble and Kelley, 1992; Soja, 1992; Watson, 1992).

The University of California, Irvine (UCI), serves a population of approximately 23 000 students. As a group, UCI students are racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. Students identify themselves as Asian American (44%), white/Caucasian (27%), Chicano(a)/Latino(a) (11%), African American/black (2%), and Native American (less than 1%) (UCI Analytical Studies and Information Management, 1999). (Approximately 11% of students registered as 'other' or registered no racial/ethnic affiliation.) 17% of UCI students are not US citizens, and many are first-generation immigrants. Many students commute to campus from throughout Los Angeles and Orange counties. Conservative students on campus are vocal (see, for example, Swingle, 2005). UCI is the college of choice for many immigrant families who want their sons or daughters to live at home while in school. It may be that, as college students, many men in this study had socially liberal attitudes about race, and yet the characteristics of the student population and the local context may temper this liberalism.

Living in a diverse, highly urbanized region—perched on the Pacific Rim, two hours from Mexico—Orange County residents share a certain consciousness of race with other Southern Californians. Strained relations between groups are revealed in past reactions to the O J Simpson trials and the Rodney King beating, heated battles over Affirmative Action in the University of California and the state of California, and recent clashes over immigrant rights and punitive anti-immigrant legislation. Orange County residents may be especially conscious of racial diversity and racial tension, compared with Americans in many other places.

### **Who is feared in public space?**

Extensive research on fear of crime identifies who is most fearful in public space, which includes those who are more socially vulnerable, such as older adults, women, low-income groups, and people of color (see Box et al, 1988; Garofalo and Laub, 1978; Gordon and Riger, 1989; Madriz, 1997; Pastore and Maguire, 2000; St. John and Heald-Moore, 1995; 1996; Skogan, 1995; Skogan and Maxfield, 1981; Vander Ven, 1998). Research also identifies who is feared. According to these studies (and consistent with expectations), men are overwhelmingly more feared than are women. Young men and men of color are especially the targets of fear, though findings vary with neighborhood composition (see Chiricos et al, 1997; Day, 1999c; Mahoney, 1995; St. John and Heald-Moore, 1995; Taylor and Covington, 1993). Men are frequently feared in outdoor, public places (Day, 1999c; Valentine, 1990). The remainder of the paper explores these experiences of being feared from men's perspectives.

## Men's experiences of being feared in public spaces

### Who was feared

Slightly more than half of the male students in this study said that they had been feared in public space (including 45 of 82 men, or 56%). Awareness of being feared differed by men's self-identified racial/ethnic groups (see table 1). [Throughout, I refer to men by the racial or ethnic categories the men themselves identified with. This practice acknowledges that, though categories such as race are not 'real' and do not exist as fixed categories, people behave as if categories are real (see Jackson and Penrose, 1993).] Though their numbers were small, most black and Hispanic men in the study said that they had experienced being feared in public spaces (100% and 82%, respectively). White and Asian men less often reported that they had been feared (53% and 52%, respectively). Men who identified with multiple and/or other racial/ethnic groups were also less likely to report having been feared (42%). (This number includes men who identified themselves as belonging to more than one racial group, and those who identified themselves as Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander, South Asian/Indian, and 'other' groups.)

**Table 1.** Male students varied in their experiences of having been feared in public spaces, linked to their self-described racial identities.

	Aware of having been feared by others in public space	Not aware of having been feared by others in public space	No response	Total
Anglo/White/Caucasian men	8 (53%)	4 (27%)	3 (20%)	15 (19%)
Asian/Asian American men	12 (52%)	10 (43%)	1 (4%)	23 (29%)
Black/African American men	4 (100%)	0	0	4 (5%)
Hispanic/Chicano/Latino men	9 (82%)	0	2 (18%)	11 (14%)
Multiple and other racial groups	8 (42%)	7 (37%)	4 (21%)	19 (24%)
Total	45 (56%)	23 (29%)	12 (15%)	82 (100%)

The experience of fearing others in public space resonates strongly with women as a gender-related issue. Most men in the study did not, however, differentiate being feared by women from being feared by other groups, such as by older men or children. Thus, men experienced being feared primarily in terms of their *own* gender and racial identities, not necessarily in terms of the gendered meanings of fear for women.

Recalling places when they were aware of being feared, men listed shopping malls, bars, and grocery stores, city streets, and the campus itself. Men described their awareness of being feared in upscale shopping malls or jewelry stores, where we might expect teenage men to be more conscious of their 'outsider' status. Some men described having been feared in particular cities such as Newport Beach, Los Angeles, and Monterey Park. These cities often carried racialized meanings that are locally recognized. Newport Beach, for example, is regarded as an affluent 'white' city. Los Angeles is synonymous with 'diversity' for many (especially for people in Orange County), and Monterey Park is known as a thriving Chinese community. It may be both that men are more often feared in places where they 'stand out' in terms of race and class, and that young men are more conscious of others' reactions to them in such settings.

Almost one third of the men in the study were not aware of having personally been feared in public spaces. (Another 15% of men provided no clear indication of whether or not they had been feared.) Men did, however, generally believe that many women were fearful in public spaces, including in the public spaces of Irvine and UCI (Day, 2001). Several possible explanations can be posited for some men's lack of awareness of

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being feared. First, being feared may be so commonplace that it does not register in the memories of young men. Men's interview responses suggest that this is sometimes the case.

Being feared is not commonplace for all men, however. In fact, several men seemed to find it strange to think that women would fear them in public spaces. Interviews asked men to explain various scenarios in which women displayed behavior in public space that could be read as fearful. One scenario, for example, describes a woman alone at an automatic banking machine, who becomes nervous as the interview respondent joins the line behind her. She hurriedly leaves after finishing her banking. Men were asked whether they had ever experienced such situations in real life. Some men denied any such experiences. They described the women's reactions in these scenarios not as legitimate, but as 'weird' or 'odd'.

"Okay, I would just go, uh, 'You're weird'. ... Like, if she really started freaking out or something, you know, I would go, 'Look, um, I'm not gonna do anything to you so, you know, you calm down. I'm just trying to get my money. Go get your money. Everything is fine'. ... I would just think that she's a little too paranoid. Just a little too paranoid" (White/Anglo/Caucasian man, age 18).

"I mean, myself, I'd probably ignore it. I'd kinda interpret it as maybe she was uncomfortable around me. She felt like I was going to grab her purse or something, if I looked scary.... It wouldn't affect my feelings. It would probably just make me think that she just had some mental problem. Maybe she was just insecure" (White/Anglo/Caucasian man, age 19).

Some men may be unaware of being feared in public spaces, especially by women, because these men have not themselves been feared. This explanation is most plausible for men who do not have the physical characteristics (of race, size, and appearance) that women fear most. And yet, the prevalence of women's fear in public spaces [especially at night, in particular kinds of places, among older women and women of color (Gordon and Riger, 1989; Valentine, 1990; 1992)] makes it unlikely that the college-age men in this study were not feared by women in public spaces at least occasionally.

More likely, it seems, is that many men in this study were not aware of being feared in public spaces because such awareness may be inconsistent with their identities as men. To understand men's responses, we must consider men's racial and gender identities and the ways in which these identities interact with men's interpretations of being feared. *Men's own racial identities are shaped by their attempts to deny, rationalize, accommodate, and resist being feared by strangers in public space.* Exchanges in public places matter at the local, 'micro scale' of the space itself and at the broader 'macro scale' of the city and region (Ruddick, 1996).

The following sections look at common experiences of being feared among men, which often overlapped with specific racial identities. I look, in particular, at the experiences of male students who identify themselves as white, Asian, and Latino<sup>(1)</sup>. I do not intend to suggest that all men who identify with a particular racial group (or are identified as such by others) shared similar experiences, or that such experiences

<sup>(1)</sup> To date, most research and writing on men's experiences of being feared in public space has examined the experiences of black men (see Bederman, 1995; hooks, 1992; Kelley, 1988; Marable, 1993; Westwood, 1990). Race factors strongly into black men's experiences of fear and safety. The limited number of people who identify as black both at UCI and in Orange County—2%, in each instance—makes it difficult to speak directly to black men's experiences of being feared in the Irvine/Orange County context. (Only four men who participated in this study identified themselves as black/African American. All four had been feared in public space.) I refer the interested reader to the existing literature on black men's experiences of being feared.

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are exclusive to men in that group. Additionally, individual men sometimes drew on more than one explanation to account for different experiences. Men's experiences of being feared reflected complex intersections of personal characteristics—racial identity, as well as age, physical appearance, background, and so on—and broader factors such as geography and history, which create the context in which men negotiate public space.

### Race privilege and 'individualism'

I asked men in the study to offer explanations for why they had or had not experienced being feared by others, and especially by women, in public spaces. Many men attributed their experiences to their own characteristics as individuals. This explanation was the most common one among men who identified themselves as white. Men in other racial groups also often explained their experiences in this way. For example, men explained that women did not fear them in public space because they (these men) were 'nice guys' or had 'good personalities', 'nice smiles', or even 'good karma'. When they *were* feared, these men frequently offered as explanations their identities as (unracialized) fear-inducing 'teens'. Men often cited their own behavior or features of their appearance not tied to race (size, clothing, hair) to explain others' fear or lack of it. [Such cues may sometimes be intended to provoke fear (see Day, 2001; Katz, 1988).] Men drew on their identities as individuals to explain their experiences of being feared or not feared in various public places—shopping malls, Disneyland, city streets, and others. In their explanations, men often assumed that strangers regarded them as 'individuals' in public space, and not as representatives of racialized groups. In this section, I focus on the experiences of those men who identified themselves as white.

"Mainly, well, at least most people tell me this, but—I don't look like a person that's going to come out and, you know, scare someone or scare them away... [it's my] conservative kind of dressing. Not a wild hairdo or something. Nothing to scare people away. Yeah, I'd say, more conservative dressing" (white/Anglo/Caucasian man, age 19).

"My face, my—I don't, I can't explain, I'm trying to think—personality, the way I act around people.... It's just, it's not very threatening at all" (white/Anglo/Caucasian man, age 18).

The meanings associated with individual characteristics such as body shape and size, dress, physical stance, and facial expression, clearly played into men's perceptions of how they were regarded by others. Men's responses sometimes reveal an awareness of how their physical bodies—as men—shape their relationship with the broader world. So, for example, shorter men sometimes remarked that their height made them less fear-inspiring to others. These responses are consistent with the scholarly literature on embodiment (see, for example, Brownmiller, 1984; Butler, 2004; Connell, 1987; 2000; Deegan, 1987; Gardiner, 1995).

"It is the ordinary, purposive orientation of the body as a whole towards things and its environment that initially defines the relation of a subject to its world" (Young, 1990b, page 143).

This orientation varies with sociohistorical circumstances (Young, 1990b). For instance, the common characteristics of how young, white, middle-class men typically move, walk, take-up space in the USA in the 21st century are not the same as they might have been two hundred years ago. Social institutions and discourses give meanings to men's bodies (such as feared or safe), but men also have agency in the social practices and the material diversity of their bodies (Connell, 2000). Thus, men can, to some extent, elect to present their bodies in ways that are more or less likely to elicit fear in public space (see Day, 2001; Katz, 1988).

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Men's explanations of 'individualism' as a reason for being or not being feared were also consistent with the tendency of many US men—especially men privileged by race or ethnicity, class, sexuality, and so on—to see themselves as 'the norm', rather than as representing a particular perspective tied to gender, racial identity, and so on (Kimmel and Messner, 1998). Whiteness, especially, allows one's perspectives and behavior to remain unmarked (Frankenberg, 1993; Mahoney, 1995). A few men in the study acknowledged the role of white race identity in their experiences of being feared.

"I don't want to get myself into a confrontational situation with other people, so I guess I just assume that they would perceive that about me... I mean, just body language. And I'm Caucasian, and I think maybe people have more fears of minorities" (white/Anglo/Caucasian man, age 36).

For white people and others privileged by race, attributing one's experiences in public space to 'individual' characteristics (personality, etc) can be part of a broader resistance to acknowledging the privileges associated with race (Lipsitz, 1998; Mahoney, 1995). Race prejudice is easy to spot (especially in others), yet race privilege often remains invisible. The experience of being feared in public space therefore becomes a problem for some racialized others, not a privilege for oneself. A few men in the study, recognizing their own race privilege, shifted the discussion of their own experiences of being feared to talk instead about discrimination against friends in other racial groups. Such tactics can sometimes have the effect of distancing oneself from the issue.

"We were at Soup Plantation one time, which is a soup restaurant right there. And there was an Asian fight. And we were all sitting there eating, and the police came. And the Asians all took off, and we were there sitting with our food. And the police came, like, and they pulled their guns. And they pulled their guns over me like this, like four of us and me. And three of my friends are pretty dark, and I'm light skinned. So they pull them on them—'Get on the ground! Get on the ground!'" (Middle Eastern man, age 18).

"If I dressed in something flashy, and I went to a store, people kind of tend to look at me.... Just that they don't know, or they might generalize. Maybe just, yeah, if they didn't know. For security reasons. I'm not sure. You know, like, with—my friend's African American. He just gets looked at. Just—I go with him, and he's the first one they look at... I don't get looked at as much. I mean, yeah, just like a couple times that they really looked at—but with him, I mean, he's mentioned it, and I've seen it too. I've seen those other people. They always tend to look at African Americans, seems like, through all the ethnicities. They look at that. I've noticed that" (Asian/Asian American man, age 20).

Many white people, in particular, find it hard to see that the construction of whiteness allows white people to *not* be feared in public spaces—to move freely, to interact easily with strangers, to escape habitual surveillance.

"The privilege that facilitates mobility and comfort in ordinary life is particularly difficult for whites to see. Opening a bank account appears routine, as does air travel without police stops, or shopping without facing questions about one's identification—unless the absence of suspicion is a privilege of whiteness (Mahoney, 1995).

By locating the problem of being feared in other people (as racist actors or racialized victims), white people may maintain their own race privilege without drawing attention to it. Of course, not all constructions of whiteness connote safety. For people of color, whiteness can signal danger of hate crime or harassment (see hooks, 1995). The question remains about whether and when white people are aware of such associations between whiteness and danger.

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### Acknowledging the role of race in fear: 'safe' but stigmatized Asian masculinity

As with white men, roughly half of the men in the study who identified themselves as Asian or Asian American men, had not experienced being feared by women in public space. Compared to the white men in the study, however, these Asian American men more often connected their experiences of being and not being feared to their racial identities.

"I would say, I mean, they would consider me kind of like, a 'blah' person whose sort of, you know, he's just there and he's not going to harm me.... You know, nothing special, nothing harmful, just there .... I think mainly it's because of my race" (Asian American/Asian man, age 19).

"It [being feared] wouldn't occur in Westminster or where it's predominantly Asian. But I think like in middle-class neighborhood that's predominantly white, it's kinda like there's a perception of a little more danger, because I'm a different race and because I'm young" (Asian/Asian American man, age 20).

In fact, the marking of the city of Irvine and UCI as 'Asian' or 'white and Asian' places is closely linked to the perceived safety of these spaces (Day, 2001).

Some men's responses reflected a consciousness of how Asian masculinity is frequently constructed as 'safe' in the US. For much of the last century, a dominant US stereotype has characterized Asian men as weak, dutiful, asexual, or homosexual, and feminized (Chen, 1996; Chua and Fujino, 1999; *Newsweek* 2000). [An opposing construction identifies Asian men as sinister villains and rapists (see Chen, 1996; Chua and Fujino, 1999). Some men in the study utilized this more sinister Asian identity and its contemporary, Southern California 'gangster' manifestation (see Day, 2001).]

The feminized notion of Asian masculinity traces its roots to US laws from the 1850s to 1930s, which prevented Chinese women from coming to the country and which banned intermarriage between Chinese and white people (Cheng, 1999; Chua and Fujino, 1999; Espiritu, 1988). The resulting society of Chinese 'bachelors' bolstered the idea of Chinese men as asexual. Widespread employment of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino men in domestic positions and 'women's' occupations (including laundry and cooking) further supported feminized constructions of Asian masculinity in the USA. These stereotypes were reinforced by the smaller (ie, more feminine) size of many Asian men compared with white men, and by the 'feminine' styles of hair and clothing among some Asian men early in the 1900s (Cheng, 1999; Chua and Fujino, 1999).

This feminized masculine identity may exempt some Asian men from associations with danger in public spaces. Ironically, the experience of *not* being feared may be demasculinizing for some Asian American and other men, as to be regarded as 'safe' may suggest that one is inadequately 'manly' to constitute a threat to women (Chua and Fujino, 1999; Westwood, 1990). For example, in one interview, a man who identified himself as Asian American, told of walking with a female friend at night after class, when the woman encountered catcalls from a stranger. The man was embarrassed, feeling that his small size diminished his stature as a 'protector' of his friend. The woman resolved the situation by rebuking the harasser herself.

Today, the 'safeness' of Asian identity in the USA is further supported by stereotypes of Asians as smart and well-educated. *Newsweek* magazine describes Asian American men as the "newest trophy boyfriends" because of their image as "future internet millionaires" (*Newsweek*, 2000). Because of successes in education and earning, Asian Americans are often regarded as more similar to whites than to 'minority' groups such as blacks and Latinos (Chen, 1996; Kobayashi, 1994, in Ruddick, 1996).

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As with white men, economic power and status may translate into an extra measure of privilege for many Asian American men in public space. Characterizations of Asian men as safe 'model minorities' can be used to justify discrimination against other 'troublemaker' groups, especially black men.

#### **Rationalizing race-based fear: the myth of limited exposure between 'opposite' groups**

Several men who identified themselves as Asian or Asian American told stories of being feared by people in public spaces where there were 'few Asians'. These men thus characterized places (cities, regions of the country, etc) in terms of their 'Asianness'. Most often, these men reported fear by white people in these locations, rather than by other racial groups. Men often explained white people's fear as a result of limited exposure to Asians.

"I went to San Luis Opisbo, where the majority of the race is not Asian. And I went there and I guess a lot of people were like staring, cause they'd never seen—I got a feeling—that much Asians, or so I guess" (Asian/Asian American man, age 20).

"There was this old lady. And then—it was really out of state, Oregon or somewhere, because me and friends were going up there. And then, I was at a gas station and then we went into the shop to buy some drinks or whatever, and she was standing there. And then I was standing right behind her. And then she, it might just be my, just being around. She was kind of nervous, looked at me 'cause maybe I'm Asian or something.... I mean, in California, there are a lot of Asians here, so that's not really an issue. But up there, there's like, you know, something like [I'm a] foreigner type of thing.... I mean, she was racist, I guess, but I did not think of it as a hatred. But it's just something, you know, out of her normal thinking parameter, that's what I thought" (Asian/Asian American man, age 25).

This 'limited exposure' explanation for fear has some utility for explaining race-based fear (see Merry, 1981), but it is also problematic. In tying fear to unfamiliarity with racialized others, the 'limited exposure' explanation positions two groups as opposite, reinforcing a 'binary' division of urban space and cultural groups (Sibley, 2001; Soja, 1996) that is rooted in fundamentalist Western distinctions between nature and nurture, pure and impure (Nash, 2003; Sibley, 1995). Such dualistic thinking obscures the complexities of cultural identities. This thinking also suggests that mistrust between opposite groups is to be expected. Thus, animosity between cultural groups is posited a naturalized condition—'human nature'—implying that such antagonisms are fixed rather than constructed (Nash, 2003).

Further, by positing groups as 'naturally' opposite but equivalent, we obscure the real differences that exist between groups in terms of power to *act* on their fears (Jackson, 1994). White people are not equivalent to other groups in this regard. White people's fear of Asian Americans (and of Latinos and blacks) has much more serious consequences than does the reverse, including implications for legal justice, exposure to violence, and access to resources.

Binary thinking reflects a concern with order and conformity, and a desire to keep unlike groups separate through boundaries between imagined safe and dangerous spaces (Sibley, 1995; 2001). Fear of different 'strangers' is controlled by segregation into like-bodied communities (Sibley, 2001). Thus, people of color have been historically excluded from privileged white neighborhoods and concentrated into poor neighborhoods that are stigmatized by race and plagued by disinvestment and unemployment (Mahoney, 1995; Sibley, 1995). White neighborhoods (and white people) are then regarded as 'naturally' good and safe, and nonwhite neighborhoods and individuals become 'naturally' suspect (Mahoney, 1995).

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### Learning to be feared: moving between safe and feared identities

Most men in the study who identified themselves as Latino also reported having been feared in public space. These men frequently described being feared by people they characterized as white or Asian American, in places that included upscale stores or 'white' or 'Asian' cities or districts (see also Mahoney, 1995). Here, the very presence of some men of color is characterized as deviant and 'out of place' (Davis, 1990; Iveson, 2003; Sibley, 1995):

"I feel that there's still a large, a lot of racism, among the races in general. Because where I lived in Los Angeles, I was very comfortable and I would go to, you know, the small Oriental communities. And I would go there, and I would always—especially among the first generation, the first immigrants that come here—they're very much, always seem 'reserved'—but the word is 'snobbish' and against my culture and my people. They are very much wary of them... [In] Irvine, specifically, that's where I spend a lot of time, I haven't had that happen to me yet. But if I go back to Alhambra or somewhere back there, then I'm gonna get it whether I'm with my friends or without" (Hispanic/Latino/Chicano man, age 19).

The smaller number of men in the study who identified themselves as Latino (11) makes interpretation of their experiences more speculative.

Unlike the Asian American men described earlier, Latino men in the study did not typically attribute others' fear to limited exposure to Latinos. Instead, men who identified as Latinos, often ascribed others' fear to negative stereotypes about Latinos. These stereotypes, based in the media and popular culture, characterize Latinos as a single group. Differences between cultures and between US 'minority' groups and new immigrants are typically ignored (Olivarez, 1998). Stereotypes of Latino men emphasize 'machismo' and dominance of women, while younger Latino men are portrayed as gang members or gangster 'wannabes' (Zinn, 1988).

Stereotypes apply to Latinos and to those who look Latino. More than one non-Latino man in the study reported that he was sometimes feared because he looked Latino. Comments referred not only to hair and skin color, but also to comportment, stance, and dress—all according meaning in our contemporary context, as discussed earlier (see Butler, 2004; Connell, 1987; 2000; Day, 2001; Day et al, 2003; Katz, 1988; Young, 1990b).

It may also be that some non-Latino men prefer to link others' fear to mistaken 'Latino' identities, rather than to attribute others' fear to their own racialized identities. Doing so might allow men to minimize the perceived prejudice directed at them as individuals and as a group. This could be especially true in the current US climate of fear of Middle Eastern men. Findings from the study do not allow us to examine this possibility more directly.

Several Latino men noted that they were not feared in 'diverse' places like Los Angeles where, they asserted, their race identities and their appearances (clothing, manners, etc) were less 'visible' (Westwood, 1990) and did not automatically signal danger. The issue is not so much whether Latino men are more visible in Los Angeles than elsewhere, but rather how Latino male bodies are 'read' by different 'viewers'. [Butler (2004) makes the same point in discussing the meaning of Rodney King's black body to jurors in the trial of King's police assailants.] Men's responses reflected their sensitivity to how their bodies are perceived by others—as young men and as members of racialized groups (see also Brownmiller, 1984; Deegan, 1987; Gardiner, 1989; 1990; 1995)—and to how the meanings of these embodied identities vary with place.

The meanings and markers of feared racial groups are fluid over space and time. For some Latino men, being the object of prejudicial fear seemed to be a new experience upon coming to UCI, Irvine, and southern Orange County. Many Latino

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students come to UCI from Los Angeles or northern Orange County, where Latinos often make up the majority in neighborhoods and schools. As students in the prestigious University of California (UC) system (only the top 12% of California students attend UC universities), some Latino men in this study described themselves as the 'smart kids' in their former schools and communities. Being marked now as 'dangerous' in upscale, white-identified Irvine was unsettling. A few men (Latino men and others) described how their identities and behavior changed over time and even throughout the day as they moved between communities (see also hooks, 1992).

"It was my first year here. I have friends from LA. They kinda tend to look like gang members. So I brought them here once for a party. It was like a dorm party or something. And this girl asked me if they were like safe to be with, because she had kind of a feeling, well, she asked me, she goes 'Are you guys like gang members? You know, 'cause we don't really like go out with gang members'. Cause she thought we were gang members just because my friends were dressed like that. And that's, I think that was, she was, I think she was scared. A lot of people there were also scared, because some of my friends have tattoos and stuff.... I mean, back home, when I hang around with them, people are not really scared because they're used to seeing guys like that, you know, in the streets."

[Later, the same man described why people fear him less now.]

"Maybe because my speech has improved. Because, I mean, I learned slang in the streets over there, and I kinda used more slang, and I kinda tend, I think I'm more educated verbally, like vocabulary-wise.... And my dress, now I work here at the Student Center. I wear a tie, I tend to dress better now. And before I used to wear baggy shirts, baggy pants, and now I don't do that anymore. I assimilated to, I guess, my surroundings.... The way I used to portray myself to like women, and I'd say like 'What's up? What's going on?' this and that, it was more like, I don't know, I guess they were scared of that, just my image. But now, it's like, 'Oh, how are you doing?' you know, and they're not as scared" (Hispanic/Latino/Chicano man, age 22).

Men themselves may change in response to their experiences of being feared (Root, 1997).

The experience of being feared in public space may play a role in young men's initial formation of racialized identities, though findings from this study do not explore this process directly. Tse (1999) posits a model of ethnic identity formation in which individuals move from (1) unawareness of ethnic identity; to (2) ambivalence towards or evasion of ethnic identity; to (3) emergence of ethnic identity, tied to a growing sense of not belonging to the dominant group or of not wanting to belong; to (4) identification with a specific racial group (see also Root, 1997; Tse, 1999). It is during their teens and early twenties, when they are most likely to be feared by strangers in public space, that men often deal with questions of racial identity.

It may be, then, that the experience of being feared in public space (and the associated anger or shame) may prompt some men to consider further their racial identities or their racial group affiliation (see also Root, 1997). In this way, young men negotiate their identities as they struggle to circumvent barriers that exclude them from privileged groups and places (see Sibley, 1995).

Likewise, in some instances, a decision not to interpret others' fear in public space as racially motivated could reflect men's desire not to see themselves as excluded, or their desire not to see the world as rife with discrimination and prejudice. In interviews, many men carefully outlined how they would assess whether another's reaction constituted fear and whether they would interpret such fear as race prejudice (see also Feagin, 1991). In this way, men constructed definitions of racism that exempted some

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conditions under which fear of men of color could be legitimately feared. Men often eliminated situations that were 'justifiably' scary (dark, night, remote, etc), as situations where another's display of fear would not constitute race prejudice. For example, one hypothetical scenario described a woman walking alone on campus at 9 o'clock at night. The woman in the scenario quickens her pace when she notices a man behind her. In interviews, several men claimed that they would not judge the woman's fear in this situation to be race prejudice, because of the context: dark, nighttime, and being alone.

"I mean, to each their own. That—just watch your own back and be cautious—that's fine. I wouldn't be offended by that, that's different. You know, it's late at night, you know, nobody's really around, and you have the impression somebody might be following you.... She doesn't know why I'm on campus, I could be, you know, I could be a night stalker for all she knows" (Middle Eastern man, age 18).

"I don't think it would be prejudice, you know, not really.... I could have very easily been someone who was going to attack her, so especially in the evening, no one else around, where she can feel vulnerable like I said, so. There's a real reason to be nervous of someone, especially if I'm catching up, you know, real close to her, kinda walking fast (Native American and white/Anglo/Caucasian man, age 19).

Thus, some young men may attempt to distance themselves from racial prejudice and avoid foreclosure on opportunities by rationalizing others' fear. Such responses leave open the possibility that discrimination can happen, especially to other people.

#### **Making exceptions for 'safe' middle-class men**

Men of color may also attempt to forefront their class status to challenge exclusion that is tied to race. Writings on men's experiences of being feared in public spaces include personal accounts by middle-class and upper-class, professional black and Latino men (Ellis, 1995; Estavillo, 1996; Kelley, 1988; Staples, 1986). In these stories, professional men (including some highly distinguished individuals) are mistaken for thugs or criminals by strangers who refuse to pick them up in taxis, scrutinize them in shops or movie theaters, or otherwise react in ways that automatically associate men's racialized bodies with danger. The authors rely on signs of middle-class status (professional dress, refined manners, even whistling classical music) to avoid rousing prejudicial fear among other middle-class strangers in public space (see Feagin, 1991).

These authors typically interpret being feared as an affront to their middle-class or professional status. In their stories, it is the idea that they are 'successful' that especially rankles. The authors' chagrin at their treatment, while understandable, does not challenge the stereotype of racialized black or Latino men as dangerous (see also Sibley, 1995). Instead, it attempts to redraw the boundaries around the stereotype to exempt middle-class individuals. As resistance, these reactions fall short by leaving intact the association between poor or working class, racially stigmatized men and danger (see also Bashi and McDaniel, 1997; Olivarez, 1998).

#### **Conclusions**

Being feared in public space has significant implications for individual men and for society. A story by Audrey Lourde (1984) reveals the emotional consequences of being feared for people of color. In the story, Lourde (a black woman) tells of being a small child on a bus, and realizing that she was despised by the white woman wedged in the seat beside her. Ruddick (1996) retells this story to show how experiences of race prejudice and fear in public space can "deeply scar the psyche, inscribing into the very bodies of people their understanding of themselves and their place in a racialized hierarchy" (page 136). For men, not being targeted by such fear is part of the "right to public space" (Iveson, 2003).

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Fear of racialized others is rooted in the dualism of culture versus nature, masculine versus feminine. This dualism underlies racist views that distinguish white people from 'savages' (Nash, 2003), and that seek safety by drawing boundaries that exclude unlike, 'dangerous' others (Sibley, 1995). Young men of color often interact with this urge towards exclusion by attempting to negotiate their identities in ways that minimize perceived differences and that stretch boundaries to include themselves. Responses to fear may thus undermine a potential solidarity between marginalized groups, such as between people of color across class lines and between members of different cultural groups.

Race-based fear has consequences for those who fear as well, in the form of expanded race privilege, especially for white people. It matters little whether fear, when expressed by individuals in public space, is 'intended' to be prejudicial. The effects are the same regardless of intent (Lipsitz, 1998).

Fear of crime in public space is frequently framed as a 'women's' problem. Women's fear is, unfortunately, often warranted. The reality of violence against women in US public spaces coexists with the reality that fear often functions to exclude racialized others. It is too simple to portray all women as victims in this equation and all men as aggressors. We must work instead to increase women's real and perceived safety while acknowledging that women and men occupy a range of positions in these relationships.

Fear that underlies public decisionmaking is even more burdensome than that expressed by individuals. The characterization of (some) racialized men as dangerous underlies discriminatory public policies, and justifies the inequitable distribution of resources in the USA. For example, current US policies related to 'homeland security' stoke and harness fear of Arab men and of Mexican immigrants, to advance the business interests of an elite minority (Saito, 2003).

Results of this study suggest directions for tackling questions of fear, race, and gender that jeopardize equality for women and for men. First, we can reconstruct masculine identities by challenging associations of some men of color with danger. Sustained efforts are needed to reveal the discrimination inherent in linking black and Latino men (and now Middle Eastern men) with danger. The media plays an important role in these efforts. At the same time, we must interrogate public policies and spending programs that are rooted in stereotypes of who is 'dangerous' and who is 'safe,' including policies that guide economic development, infrastructure planning, and law enforcement.

Young (1990a) suggests one possibility in her description of the 'city of difference'—urban space that acknowledges difference and that seeks not homogeneous 'community', but rather acceptance of copresence and unassimilated otherness. These urban spaces defy binaries, and encourage decreased border maintenance and lessened preoccupation with the separation into pure and impure (Sibley, 2001). The postsuburban geography of places like Orange County—neither city nor suburb, centerless, peripheryless, with liminal spaces at the borders of cities and counties—offers this potential for multiplicity, at least in principle, if individuals and groups can overcome the urge to fortress and exclude (Davis, 1990).

For the individual or group socialized into believing that the separation of categories is necessary or desirable, the liminal zone is a source of anxiety. It is a zone of abjection, one that should be eliminated in order to reduce anxiety, but this is not always possible. Individuals lack the power to organize their worlds into crisp sets and so eliminate spaces of ambiguity (Sibley, 1995, page 33).

Supportive policies would help to blur these boundaries by supporting public life over private retreat. Sibley (2001) includes here such interventions as investment in public transportation rather than private transportation systems, and support for

residential development in center cities instead of in private enclaves. When exclusion is supported, it should be to foster public spaces that afford sanctuary to marginalized groups (Iveson, 2003), and not to protect power by excluding feared others.

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