The Diversity Contract: Constructing Racial Harmony in a Diverse American Suburb

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April 2020

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Abstract

Though theorists have long argued that ideology and material conditions emerge in relation to one another, the connection between racial ideology and place is under-theorized. I examine the dominant racial ideology in a community that diverges from the typical American racial context – a highly racially diverse suburb. Through analysis of in-depth interviews (N = 109) with residents of Fort Bend County, TX, I uncover a local racial ideology that I term the diversity contract. In contrast to colorblindness, which involves avoidance of any discussion of race, Fort Bend residents exhibit a selective engagement with race: It must be recognized for certain purposes – including to celebrate diversity – but recognition of racial inequality or racism is not permitted. Through the diversity contract, community members co-construct the appearance of a racially harmonious community. I theorize that the diversity contract emerges in highly selective, socioeconomically homogeneous diverse suburbs and find preliminary support for this theory through comparative interviews in Queens County, NY (N=20). My findings suggest that place should be centralized in analyses of racial ideology and illustrates how racial inequality is upheld through different ideological means across varying local contexts.
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A key contribution of U.S. race scholarship in the past century has been the delineation of dominant racial ideologies that function to maintain white supremacy. There is consensus among social scientists that in the contemporary United States colorblindness is the dominant national racial ideology, and much research documents that many Americans – both whites and people of color – subscribe to colorblind beliefs (see Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 2011 and Burke 2018 for overviews). However, this broad, national focus misses a critical source of variation in racial ideologies – place. Theorists have long argued that ideology cannot be understood without considering the material conditions in which it exists (Bourdieu 1977; Hays 1994; Jung 2015; Sewell 1992), but studies of racial ideology have only incorporated material conditions at the broad, national level, comparing, for instance, the Jim Crow period to the post-Civil Rights era (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2013). Some scholars have argued that race itself as well as ideas about race are spatially constituted (Cheng 2013; Gilmore 2002; Lung-Amam 2017; Pulido 2006), and sociologists have called for the relationship between ideology and material conditions – including housing, community resources, and opportunity structures – to be given a central role when analyzing racial attitudes and ideologies (Burke 2016; Jung 2015). However, these calls to contextualize the study of racial ideology have yet to be met with much empirical investigation (see Ray 2019 for an application of this argument to organizational research).

In this work, I take the interconnection between place and ideas about race as a starting point and investigate racial beliefs and dynamics in an empirical site that is theoretically useful for investigating place-specific racial ideologies: diverse suburban communities. While the norm for U.S. communities for the past century has been racial segregation (Logan and Stults 2011;
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Massey and Tannen 2018), diversification and integration are occurring in a number of American communities. Importantly, virtually all integrated, diverse communities are located in the suburbs (Bader and Warkentien 2016; Rastogi 2020). Further, research indicates that these communities are more affluent than the average suburb and feature highly selected populations from all racialized groups (Douds and Rastogi 2020). Diverse, integrated suburbs diverge from the typical local American racial context in ways that might suggest a distinct local racial ideology. How is white domination maintained in such contexts, where all racialized groups exhibit some degree of socioeconomic advantage and a hallmark American mechanism of racial inequality – spatial separation – is not present?

Through analysis of 109 in-depth interviews with residents of one of the most diverse suburban counties – Fort Bend County, Texas – I uncover a local racial ideology quite different from colorblindness that functions to maintain and obscure white domination in a diverse suburban setting. Borrowing from Charles Mill’s articulation of the Racial Contract, I term this ideology and the rules and norms that result from it the diversity contract. Residents of all racial identities abide by the diversity contract, which enables the construction of a racially harmonious community – or at least the appearance of one. In contrast to colorblindness, which involves avoidance of any discussion of race based on the belief that it does not matter (Bonilla-Silva 2002), residents of Fort Bend exhibit a selective engagement with race: Race must be recognized for certain purposes – including to celebrate and place value on diversity and positive daily cross-racial interactions – but recognition of racial inequality or racism is not permitted. Key elements of the diversity contract include the belief that, unlike the rest of the nation, the community has no racial tension and there is no racial inequality. Community members enforce this ideology and punish those who violate the terms of the contract. The existence of such
strongly held and community-policed norms in a large, diverse suburban area provides evidence for the powerful role that contextual factors play in shaping everyday racial experiences and ideologies.

The diversity contract has contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, residents find their community to be more racially peaceful than other places and feel that overt racism is rare in it. This results in an everyday living environment in which residents feel welcome, safe, and as if their race does not shape their experiences. On the other hand, the very beliefs and rules that construct this superficial harmony make it impossible for those who do experience racial exclusion or racism to share these experiences and have them validated or addressed. As a result, though all community members benefit in tangible ways from the diversity contract, the terms of the contract are costlier for residents of color. Further, even as the diversity contract eases everyday living, it ultimately obscures racial inequality and in doing so upholds white supremacy.

I theorize that the diversity contract emerges because of the selectivity and resulting socioeconomic homogeneity of suburban communities. Racial diversity in suburban communities results in everyday contexts in which residents are not exposed to the full spectrum of material racial inequality in American society. To an extent, suburban communities “control” for socioeconomic differences across groups through mechanisms of selection and exclusion that limit the socioeconomic variation within the community with great consequences for how suburban residents think about race. To test my theory, I assess the racial ideology dominant in Queens County, New York, a similarly diverse but urban – and therefore socioeconomically heterogeneous – community. Through analysis of in-depth interviews with residents (N = 20), I find no signs of the diversity contract in Queens, providing suggestive evidence to support my
theory. Based on this analysis, I predict that the diversity contract will be at play in diverse suburban communities to varying degrees depending on their level of selectivity and resulting socioeconomic homogeneity.

This work makes two primary contributions. First, I empirically investigate a place-specific racial ideology in a demographically important context – diverse suburbs – and find in this context a dominant racial ideology quite different from colorblindness. This validates the theoretical call to centralize place in our analyses of racial ideology and illustrates that racial inequality is upheld through different ideological means across different contexts. Second, through these findings, my work shows that diverse suburban communities, an understudied context (Lacy 2016), feature unique racial dynamics that demand more attention by race scholars seeking to understand racial processes in 21st century American society.

In the following sections, I review theories on racial ideologies to argue that they should be contextualized and draw on Mills’ Racial Contract to lay out a framework for doing so. Next, I theorize why diverse suburban environments will require and create racial ideologies distinct from other types of places. I then provide background on my empirical case, Fort Bend County, Texas, and my methodological approach. Following these sections, I detail my empirical findings on the community beliefs and rules in Fort Bend that make up the diversity contract and compare them to those found in Queens. To conclude, I discuss the implications of the diversity contract and what the case of Fort Bend can teach us about the future of racially diverse suburbs in the 21st century.

**Contextualizing Racial Ideologies**

In this section, I define racial ideology and review key theories about contemporary racial ideologies in the United States. Then, responding to scholarship arguing that ideas about race are
spatially constituted, I draw on Mill’s (1997) Racial Contract framework – specifically, the concept of subsidiary contracts – to theorize place-specific racial ideologies.

*Contemporary Racial Ideologies*

To define and theoretically situate racial ideologies, I draw on Jung’s (2015) theory of racial structures. Jung defines racial ideologies as “conscious and deliberative…opinions about race,” and dominant racial ideologies “explain and justify the racial status quo,” or systemic white supremacy (p. 41). For Jung, racial ideologies are a part of a broader racial structure, which has two main elements – schemas and resources.1 Schemas encompass the cultural, or meaning-based, elements of social structures, including racial ideologies. Resources include tangible material resources as well as financial and knowledge resources. Jung emphasizes that schemas and resources are “mutually sustaining,” each contingent on the other (p. 30, quoted from Sewell 1992). This framework shows clearly the close linkage between racial ideologies and material conditions and highlights that “racial ideologies are fluid constructions that emerge, persist, evolve, and even disappear in response to social and political changes” (Doane 2017:980).

The general consensus among social scientists is that the dominant racial ideology in the United States during the contemporary post-Civil Rights era is colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Burke 2018). According to this ideology, racism is no longer an issue, race does not matter, and any racial inequality that currently exists is the result of individual or cultural failings by people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2013). Out of the beliefs that make up a dominant racial

1 Critically, as Jung (2015) notes, the boundary between the schemas and resources is “not sharp but fuzzy” (p. 29) For instance, knowledge could be either a schema (set of meanings) or a resource to be wielded. However, as Jung notes, “In any given analysis, the fuzziness of many schemas and resources can be – and, for practicability, needs to be – assumed and bracketed,” and I make this assumption here for my analysis.
ideology social rules and norms emerge to uphold that ideology. For instance, because the beliefs that make up colorblindness leave “little space for socially sanctioned speech about race-related matters,” a resulting rule that emerges is “avoidance of direct racial language,” as such language could create divisions where none are believed to exist (Bonilla-Silva 2002:43). This social rule functions to obscure racial inequality by disallowing any conversation about race.

In the midst of this colorblind era, there is also a seemingly incongruent public focus on racial diversity and multiculturalism. Though a focus on racial diversity would seem to lend itself to pushes for racial equity, research on how diversity is understood and experienced consistently finds that celebration of or a focus on diversity often fails to reduce racial inequality (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Burke 2012; Embrick 2011; Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Thomas 2018; Tissot 2014). In her study of how diversity is understood and achieved in organizational contexts, Berrey (2015) provides important insight into how the goal – and achieved reality – of diversity does not necessarily diminish racial inequalities. She found that diversity initiatives are often selective in what types of minorities they admit: “Desirable diversity is routinely characterized as the representation of high-status, upwardly mobile, or otherwise culturally appealing people of color and women” (p. 8). Similarly, Warikoo (2016) details how white students at elite U.S. colleges agree to a “diversity bargain” in which they accept affirmative action for students of color as long as the resulting diversity benefits them with a better learning environment and does not threaten their own ability to gain admission to the institution. While seemingly race-conscious, a focus on diversity does not necessarily address racial power dynamics or create more equitable systems (Berrey 2015; Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017).

Mayorga-Gallo has built upon these and other findings to argue that a new racial ideology – the diversity ideology – has emerged among some groups, particularly middle-class liberal
whites. The diversity ideology, which is a response to calls for greater color consciousness in the wake of colorblindness, has four tenets: (1) Diversity is conceptualized as acceptance of difference, (2) Diversity is defined by good intentions rather than outcomes, (3) People of color are commodified for their diversity value, and (4) Diversity, despite being perceived positively, is seen as a liability and threat (e.g., whites see it as bad for home values or safety). The diversity ideology is “a co-optation of calls for race consciousness” and conceptualizes diversity in a way that is “devoid of power and history” (Mayorga-Gallo 2019:2). The diversity ideology was developed using mostly-white samples, however, so it is an empirical question whether people of color also subscribe to it (Mayorga-Gallo 2014). The diversity ideology provides critical insight regarding how diversity may be ideologically harnessed to reproduce racial inequality under the guise of racial awareness. Though Mayorga-Gallo posits that the diversity ideology may be more prevalent in diverse settings, place is not specifically incorporated into her theory.

Emplacer Racial Ideologies

Though ideology has long been theorized to be intricately related to the material conditions in which it emerges (Bourdieu 1977; Hays 1994; Jung 2015; Sewell 1992), the connection between racial ideology and place is under-theorized, with the exception of broad, national conditions (Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Burke 2016). However, a growing body of scholarship argues that race itself and racial beliefs are spatially constituted and that place should be given a more central role in the study of racial ideologies. These theorists argue that we cannot ask how specific ideas about racialized groups or racial hierarchies develop without taking into account the spaces in which they emerge (Cheng 2013; Gilmore 2002; Lung-Amam 2017; Pulido 2006). Though racial ideologies are rooted in national political and
economic processes, they are also informed by and expressed in local contexts with their own histories, spatial forms, and group dynamics (Li 2009; Lung-Amam 2017).

Cheng argues that everyday landscapes are “crucial terrains through which racial hierarchies are learned, instantiated, and transformed” (Cheng 2013:3). Local, place-specific dynamics shape the way people interpret and, at times, reject national racial ideologies. As Ray (2019) argues, ideologies about race “are always expressed in relation to the distribution of resources along racial lines” (p. 32) and as such “studies of racial ideology and racial attitudes – often abstracted from the context in which these attitudes are developed and expressed – should be contextualized” (p.47). Because local places vary in both types and amounts of material and social resources – including housing, amenities, and opportunity structures – and in configurations of resources across racialized groups, we must study racial ideology in relation to local material conditions. By thinking about racial ideology as spatially constituted, we are able to consider the ways that racial ideology adapts and transforms to maintain and obscure white domination across different local contexts.

To theoretically contextualize racial ideology, we need a framework that allows us to consider the intertwined relationship between local place conditions and ideas about race. For this framework, I draw on Mills’ theory of the Racial Contract, an adaptation of philosophers’ social contract. The social contract is a theorized agreement among members of a society to give up certain rights and privileges in exchange for the creation of a society that provides benefits like the protection of private property. This perspective is useful because it provides a framework for understanding the structure of a particular society and the rules and beliefs that uphold its structure (Mills 1997; Pateman 1988). Mills adopts this perspective to outline what he terms the Racial Contract: an agreement among whites to categorize racial others as non-white and
relegate them to subordinate moral and civil status (Mills 1997). The goal of the Racial Contract is to uphold the racial structure, global white supremacy.

Mills’ theory explicitly theorizes time- and place-specific variations in articulations or “instantiations” of the Racial Contract. He terms local variations in the content of the contract’s terms “subsidiary contracts.” He argues that because spaces are “normed and raced at the macrolevel, the local level, and even the microlevel” we will see “local variations of the Racial Contract, depending on circumstances and the particular mode of exploitation” (Mills 1997:30). Subsidiary contracts are in line with the overarching Racial Contract – they support the system of global white supremacy – but they adjust to local variations in resource arrangements, “continually being rewritten” (p. 37). Thus, we can think of subsidiary contracts as the schematic (e.g., meaning-based, cultural) portion of local racial structures (Jung 2015). Through subsidiary contracts, Mills theoretically links racial ideology to time- and place-specific conditions. Mills uses the historical shifts from slavery to colonialism to modern colorblindness to illustrate this linkage: During slavery and colonialism, the Racial Contract required, among other things, an ideology of biological racial difference; however, specific ideas of biological differences varied across nations (Seamster and Ray 2018; Wolfe 2001). In the present U.S. context, subtler ideologies like colorblindness are required (Bonilla-Silva 2013). By explicitly theorizing the relationship between place-specific conditions and racial ideology in a given context, the framework of the Racial Contract enables us to consider how the characteristics of a particular place determine what ideology will be required to uphold white dominance within it.

In addition to explicitly theorizing the relationship between local resource arrangements and racial ideologies through subsidiary contracts, the Racial Contract metaphor brings to the fore the perceived costs and benefits of “consenting” to the contract, or local racial ideology –
and the consequences of refusing to sign. This is particularly useful for examining the current case, an affluent and diverse suburb. In Fort Bend, where residents deliberately and freely opt into the community over other options, this is particularly helpful.

**Theorizing Diverse Suburban Contexts**

During the 20th century, two large-scale processes swept through the United States, fundamentally changing the nature and structure of U.S. society: racial/ethnic diversification and suburbanization. These processes changed both the demographic composition and spatial organization of the population, and their consequences affect almost every aspect of American life. These two processes are now converging in the emergence of racially diverse suburbs, which diverge markedly from the spatial American norm of racial segregation (Massey and Tannen 2018). In this section, I review the rise of diverse suburban communities and argue that these communities feature unique racial environments that require a racial ideology that maintains white domination in a context in which spatial proximity among racialized groups and relative socioeconomic homogeneity are the norms.

**Racial Diversification of Suburbia**

In 1965, the Hart-Celler Act radically reshaped the face of immigration to America. As of 2017, 43 million immigrants, mainly from Latin America, Asia, and Africa resided in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). During the same period, suburbanization reshaped the spatial structure of American life. In 1950, only a quarter of all Americans lived in the suburbs, but, by 1990, more than half did so (Kruse and Sugrue 2006). By design, suburbs were not equally accessible to all Americans. Policies stemming from initiatives like the New Deal and the GI Bill subsidized moves to the suburbs for whites but largely excluded people of color (Jackson 1987; Kruse and Sugrue 2006) (this exclusion, however, was never perfectly executed— see Clerge
2019; Wiese 2005). For many decades, the suburbs remained predominantly white with the aid of practices like redlining, restrictive covenants, and violence (Rothstein 2017).

This is no longer the case. Despite continued stereotyping by everyday citizens and scholars alike of the suburbs as primarily white, homogeneous spaces, American suburbs now feature much diversity (Kruse and Sugrue 2006). Indeed, increasing numbers of scholars are drawing our attention to the fact that “social diversity has become more the suburban rule than the exception” (Lung-Amam 2017:4). For the past three decades, people of color have been the primary contributors to suburban growth, and, in 2010, for the first time the majority of each major racial and ethnic group – Blacks, Latinxs, Asians, and whites – resided in the suburbs, not central cities (Frey 2014). That year, American suburbs were 65 percent white, 17 percent Latinx, 10 percent Black, and 6 percent Asian (Frey 2001, 2014). Today, several suburban communities are majority people of color (Cheng 2013; Li 2009; Logan and Zhang 2010; Lung-Amam 2017; Wiese 2005). Further, the majority of American immigrants (51 percent) are also suburbanites (Wilson and Singer 2011).

Movement of people of color and immigrants to the suburbs is leading to the diversification of individual suburban communities and, in many cases, integration. Though housing discrimination is still pervasive (Galster and Godfrey 2005; Korver-Glenn 2018), suburbs feature lower racial residential segregation than central cities (Farrell 2008; Iceland, Sharp, and Timberlake 2013; Parisi et al. 2015). In fact, virtually all integrated, diverse communities in the United States – 99.5 percent – are suburban (Rastogi 2020). Recent work comparing diverse, integrated suburbs with non-diverse suburbs finds that diverse, integrated suburbs are socioeconomically advantaged in terms of median income, educational attainment, and home and rent values relative to non-diverse suburbs (Douds and Rastogi 2020). That
diversity and integration occur primarily in suburban communities – and that these outcomes are attained in advantaged suburbs - suggests distinct racial processes at play in suburbs.

*Suburban Racial Contexts*

Suburban communities have distinct contextual features that have implications for how residents understand and experience race. In his now classic work on the history of suburbanization in the United States, Jackson defined suburbs by four characteristics that distinguish them from central cities: they are primarily residential areas that feature low density, physical separation between businesses and residences, and high rates of home ownership among primarily middle- and upper-class residents (Jackson 1987). Though there has always been significant variation across suburban communities – including the existence of working-class and majority people of color suburban communities (Nicolaides 2002; Wiese 2005) – this definition captures the dominant suburban form through the mid-twentieth century. However, one major shift is important: Suburbs are no longer primarily residential. Today’s suburbs aim to be places where individuals can live, work, and play without needing to commute into the central city. Kruse and Sugrue (2006) argue that the fundamental distinguishing feature of suburbs in the 21st century is not their function but instead “the fragmentation and proliferation of local governments” (p. 5). It this fragmented organization resulting in variously sized municipal governments competing with one another that makes suburbs fundamentally different from larger, governmentally unified central cities, and this difference has important implications for the experiences of suburban residents.

As independent political actors, suburban municipalities are able to engage in strategies that concentrate affluence and keep out poverty. First, exclusionary zoning allows municipalities to specify what can be built within their boundaries. Local zoning can be used to set minimum
lot sizes, minimum building sizes, and property type requirements, such as single-family homes. These zoning restrictions function to exclude low-income residents and ensure only individuals with a sufficient level of socioeconomic status can enter the community (Fischel 2015; Frug 2006; Rothstein 2017). Indeed, low-density zoning restrictions increase metropolitan-level income segregation because they enable the affluent to effectively keep out poor residents (Rothwell and Massey 2010). Second, local taxation ensures that suburban residents’ resources will not be redistributed to those with fewer resources (Frug 2006). Tax laws enable municipalities to raise local taxes and keep the revenue for local spending on schools, police, amenities, and other services. That is, none of the taxes go to the broader metropolitan area. Because suburbs limit who can live in their community through zoning, local taxation serves as a mechanism of resource hoarding.

Because of these realities, suburbanization can be understood as a process of spatial inequality creation. As suburban communities spring up around central cities and compete with one another for residents and businesses (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2015; Logan and Molotch 2007), economic homogenization occurs. Very wealthy suburbs attract the very wealthy and exclude those with fewer socioeconomic resources. Middle class suburbs seek to maintain their status by excluding the working class and poor. The constraints and structure of metropolitan competition amongst several independent political actors, real estate valuation logics, and racial and class bias together create this result. This is evident in the increase in segregation between municipalities over the past few decades (Rothwell and Massey 2010).

From this perspective, suburban spaces are fundamentally different than urban spaces. Though central cities may be economically segregated, rich and poor residents remain politically connected and share common services. In central cities, redistribution of resources is possible.
This is not the case for suburbs. When successful, suburbs limit the amount of economic inequality within their boundaries. As suburbs racially diversify, the amount of socioeconomic racial inequality within individual suburbs is also limited. Everyday life in these suburbs may obscure the fact that American society is a racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 1997).

I argue that diversification of socioeconomically homogeneous suburbs has implications for how residents think about and experience race because they are not exposed to the full spectrum of U.S. material racial inequality in their own community. This is especially relevant given that diverse, integrated suburbs are more affluent than the average suburb (Douds and Rastogi 2020). Residents of diverse suburban communities live their everyday lives in a context in which they see individuals of all racial identities who have a similar socioeconomic status to themselves. Unlike in central cities, which contain the full array of American racial inequality, the selectivity of suburban communities reduces the amount of racial inequality experienced and witnessed. In these contexts, a dominant racial ideology must adapt to spatial proximity of among racialized groups and to relative homogeneity in socioeconomic status across racialized groups.

**Empirical Case: Diversity in an “Ideal” Suburb**

Fort Bend is a suburban county located approximately 25 miles southwest of Houston. The county was the site of the largest slave plantation in Texas and later a large-scale convict leasing system (Steptoe 2015). It remained primarily agricultural until the late 1970s, when, feeding off Houston’s booming oil and gas economy, it entered a period of explosive growth. The population increased from 130,000 in 1980 to 711,000 in 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). From 2013-2016, it was the nation’s fastest-growing large county. Though the county’s original growth was fueled by economic opportunities in Houston, over time the county has attracted
many large businesses within its own borders. In 2017, Fort Bend ranked fourth among all U.S. counties for receiving the most incoming investments (SmartAsset 2017).

Fort Bend has experienced rapid racial and ethnic diversification. In 1980, as shown in Figure 1, the county was 61 percent non-Latinx white, 20 percent Latinx, 15 percent Black, 3 percent Asian, and 1 percent other race. By 2017, the county had become 34 percent white, 24 percent Latinx, 20 percent Black, 19 percent Asian, and 2 percent other race. In addition, 28 percent of county residents were foreign born, up from 7 percent in 1980 (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). Since 1980, all racial and ethnic groups have experienced continuous population growth (see Appendix Figure A1 for population counts by group over time). Critically, white flight at the county level has not occurred.

By many measures, Fort Bend is one of the most racially diverse counties in the United States. If diversity is conceptualized as equal representation of the major American racial and ethnic groups, a “perfectly” diverse county would be 25 percent non-Latinx white, Latinx, Black, and Asian (Hall, Tach, and Lee 2016). We can then measure to what extent counties diverge from this perfectly even arrangement. If diversity is measured in this way – mathematically accomplished by computing a standardized entropy index – Fort Bend has the second most even distribution in the country, second only to Queens County, New York for counties with 100,000 residents or more. By this measure, Fort Bend is the most diverse suburban county in the United States (author’s calculation using 2017 American Community Survey five-year estimates).

Of note is that, while Fort Bend was majority white for much of the 20th century, Latinx people were present before whites arrived, and Black people have resided in Fort Bend since slavery was introduced to the region by Stephen F. Austin’s “Old 300” families (Steptoe 2015). Andrea Robert’s Texas Freedom Colonies Atlas lists five freedom colonies, communities founded by freed Black people after emancipation in Fort Bend (Roberts n.d.). Another common measure of diversity is the fractionalization index, which can be interpreted as the probability that two randomly selected individuals will belong to different racial or ethnic groups (Alesina et al. 2003). By this
In addition to diversity, Fort Bend features substantial residential and social integration; that is, most residents live in diverse neighborhoods and encounter people from other racialized groups at the grocery store, in public parks, and throughout the community. To assess integration, I calculate Theil’s H rather than the commonly used dissimilarity index because Theil’s H can measure integration for more than two groups and the dissimilarity index cannot (Massey and Denton 1988). When H=0, all census tracts match the overall county’s racial composition (i.e., all tracts feature the same diversity as the county), and when H=1, each census tract only has one racialized group. For Fort Bend, H=.18. For comparison, Queens County, which is similarly diverse but features greater segregation, has an H score of .31. For Harris County, which contains Houston, H=.23, and for Cook County, which contains Chicago, H=.40. Because of historical development patterns, there is variation in the level of integration across the county; older areas tend to be less integrated than newer areas. Whereas the county as a whole has an entropy index score of .98, individual tracts’ entropy scores range from .4 to 1.0. This translates into tracts being at most 80 percent one group, though most tracts are more diverse; no tracts reach the literature’s definition of monoracial (90 percent or more one group) (Hall, Crowder, and Spring 2015).

In addition to statistical assessment of integration, I conducted ethnographic observations in Fort Bend for over 20 public spaces and events and found substantial integration of public spaces. For instance, in January 2019, I observed visitors to First Colony Mall, the largest and primary mall in Fort Bend. Of the 160 visitors I observed, 29 percent appeared Black, 31

measure, Fort Bend is the third most diverse county. Queens County is again the most diverse, and Alameda County, California is the second most diverse.

4 I say “appear” because I classified individuals according my best guess of their racial identity based on phenotypical appearance. Of course, some of my classifications may be incorrect and may not align with individuals’ own identities. The purpose of the ethnographic observations was to determine the approximate racial composition of various public spaces; the percentages should be taken as rough estimates.
percent appeared Latinx, 20 percent appeared Asian, and 21 percent appeared white. Observations at public libraries, public parks, and community event featured similar diversity.

According to most residents as well as objective measures, Fort Bend is a highly desirable and successful suburban community. Fort Bend contains 5 of the nation’s top 50 top-selling master-planned communities with amenities like pools, golf courses, hike and bike trails, and community gardens (RCLCO 2016). In addition to highly desirable neighborhoods, Fort Bend has a low crime rate, and – most important to many residents – the primary school district within the county, Fort Bend Independent School District (FBISD), is one of the best in the state and is considered by many to be the best in the Houston region. While a county is not always a socially meaningful geographic unit, in Fort Bend the county has clear social meaning. Because the highly desirable school district, FBISD, stretches across most of the county, residents often make the decision to move to “Fort Bend” rather than one of its specific cities. This is common in the South, where counties and school districts are often coterminous, and counties themselves have greater political power than in other regions (Fischel 2015). In addition, the majority of the county is unincorporated but developed; several of the most amenity-rich, desirable subdivisions are on unincorporated land. Though there are socially meaningful differences across the cities, most residents speak about Fort Bend and their specific city – such as Sugar Land, Missouri City, or Rosenberg, the three largest cities – interchangeably.

Fort Bend has accomplished these feats by successfully implementing mechanisms that suburban communities across the nation use – to larger and smaller degrees of success – to control what types of people can access it. Most critically, Fort Bend has been successful at

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5 Master-planned communities are large-scale residential communities – ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands of homes – that are planned and built by a single developer, usually on undeveloped land, to include a wide array of community amenities, such as pools, bike trails, shopping and stores, golf courses, and community social institutions.
limiting poverty within its borders. In 2017, Fort Bend was the richest county in Texas with a median household income of $94,000, compared to a national median income of $58,000, and the poverty rate was 6 percent, compared to the national rate of 11 percent. That same year, 29 percent of residents 25 years and older held a bachelor’s degree only, and 17 percent held a master’s or professional degree. The largest city, Sugar Land, has a median income of $108,000, and 35 percent of residents age 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree only (24 percent have a master’s or higher). To many in the Houston region and to most of my respondents, Fort Bend represents the top of the locational attainment hierarchy in the Houston region. Fort Bend’s population is a highly selected group of individuals who have “made it.”

Within this affluence, there remains racial inequality: The county median income in 2017 for non-Latinx whites was $112,000, for Asians was $115,000, for Blacks was $76,000, and for Latinxs was $67,000. Table 1 provides a comparison across racialized groups of socioeconomic indicators. Latinxs have the worst outcomes, followed by Blacks. Whites and Asians are close to parity on all measures, but Asian residents have a college degree advantage. Though all groups have high – 70 percent or higher – homeownership rates, Asians and whites have the highest rates, providing some insight into wealth inequality in Fort Bend. Importantly, however, all four groups in Fort Bend are highly selected. Table 1 also shows the median household income for each group as a ratio of the U.S. median household income for that group. The median income for whites in Fort Bend is 1.8 times greater than the median income for whites nationally. For Blacks, the ratio is 2.0. For Latinxs and Asians, the ratio is 1.4. In Fort Bend, residents encounter high income and well-educated individuals from all racialized groups in their everyday lives.

[Table 1 about here]
Fort Bend represents an extreme rather than representative case of diversity in suburbia. Its extreme-ness in terms of both diversity and suburban success provide analytical clarity to assess what racial ideology exists – to larger and smaller degrees – in diverse suburban communities across the country. As a theoretical case, Fort Bend represents extreme diversification in an “ideal” suburban community. Though most of America’s suburbs will become more racially diverse over the coming decades, most will not experience the same degree of diversification as Fort Bend, either in total proportion of the population of color or the evenness of the groups represented. In addition, Fort Bend in most respects represents the “ideal” of what suburban communities aim to be: a growing, affluent community that removes poverty and other social problems to areas outside of its borders. Not all suburbs are affluent. There has long been class variation in suburbs (Hall and Lee 2010; McManus and Ethington 2007), and there is an important growing research focus on poverty in American suburbs (Madden 2003; Murphy 2007). However, evidence suggests that diverse, integrated suburbs are more affluent – and therefore more highly selective – than the average suburb. Thus, for theoretical reasons I focus on a case of a highly selective, successful suburb with extreme diversity. Extreme cases make the processes and dynamics that we seek to study more apparent. In Fort Bend, we can see the processes at play in diverse suburbs most clearly.

**Data and Methods**

In-depth interviews with Fort Bend residents provide the primary data for this analysis. Between June 2017 and January 2019, I conducted 109 interviews with adult residents of Fort Bend. Respondents were recruited through snowball sampling and were told the study was about life in diverse communities. I began recruitment by first contacting approximately 20 seeds – personal contacts that I knew from living in the county about a decade ago. The seed group was
distributed throughout the county’s cities and was racially diverse. Seeds were not interviewed but were asked to refer friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers to be interviewed. I also recruited some participants through everyday interactions in the county, such as at restaurants or the grocery store. Each interviewee was then asked to recommend others for the study. I allowed each seed or interviewee to recommend up to four individuals (the mode was one referral) to ensure that my sample is not heavily biased by the peculiarities of any particular social network. Respondents had to be residents of Fort Bend County, age 18 or older, and able to converse in English. If respondents were immigrants, they must have lived in the United States for at least five years to ensure familiarity with U.S. society. Collecting data across two years allowed for analysis between data collection periods and enabled me to tailor recruitment to test emerging findings. This method of sequential interviewing aims for logical inference rather than inference based on a representative sample (Small 2009).

Table 2 provides a basic demographic portrait of the sample broken down by racialized group. The sample reflects the diversity of Fort Bend: 30 respondents were non-Latinx white, 22 were Black, 23 were Latinx, and 34 were Asian. Of the Asian respondents, 17 were South Asian, 12 were East Asian, and 5 were Southeast Asian. In addition, 25 respondents immigrated to America at or after the age of 12, and 30 were born and raised in Fort Bend. Overall, the sample is well-educated, though Latinxs have the lowest levels of educational attainment.

[Table 2 about here]

Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours and were conducted at a location of the respondent’s choosing (usually their home, office, or a coffee shop). The interview guide was designed to first ask general and broad questions about respondents’ personal history followed by questions about their experiences in and thoughts about Fort Bend, including how they came
to live there and their first impressions of the area. Beginning with general questions was important in order to allow respondents the space to articulate the aspects of their community and experiences that were important to them. This was done to inductively uncover how respondents think about their community before specifically discussing diversity and the racial dynamics of the county. Though Fort Bend is one of the most diverse suburban counties in the United States, its residents may not experience it through that lens. Respondents were asked to describe in their own words their background, Fort Bend, their neighborhood, and various events and everyday occurrences within the county and in other places they have lived or travelled. In this way, interviewees were asked to “ethnographize” their experiences (Pugh 2013), providing rich data on the way that they make sense of their surroundings and everyday interactions. After asking a series of general questions, I then asked questions specifically about diversity and race in Fort Bend, including how respondents have experienced and think about the diversification of the area as well as racial issues or problems. In the final portion of the interview, I asked respondents a series of questions about race and racial inequality in general in America.

In addition to in-depth interviews with residents, my analysis of Fort Bend is supplemented by seven months of ethnographic observations of political campaigns, governmental affairs, and public life as well as two years of close analysis of current events to provide data on residents’ everyday lived experiences as well as on events in which race becomes highly salient (i.e., in local elections and school re-zoning). Because the primary analysis here focuses on everyday residents’ experiences and perceptions, I only include two examples – the FBISD disciplinary case and the multiethnic church – from these other data here; however, the remainder of my data align with the findings described.
To test my conclusions about what features of Fort Bend result in a unique, spatially constituted racial ideology, I also conducted interviews at a theoretically chosen comparison site – Queens County, New York. Queens is the most racially diverse urban county in the United States (and the most diverse overall). In 2017, Queens was 25 percent non-Latinx white, 17 percent Black, 28 percent Latinx, 25 percent Asian, and 4 percent other race (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Characteristic of an urban area – and unlike Fort Bend – Queens is socioeconomically heterogeneous, featuring both extreme wealth and poverty. While the median income of Queens was $62,000 in 2017, 11 percent of families lived below the poverty line, almost twice the rate in Fort Bend. In addition, 13 percent of households had incomes over $150,000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Like most urban areas, Queens is also highly racially segregated, whereas in Fort Bend most neighborhoods are racially integrated (Massey and Tannen 2018). This segregation greatly shapes how urban residents experience race and diversity, as I describe below.

I conducted 20 interviews with Queens residents from October 2018 through July 2019. Data collection ceased when saturation was reached with regard to determining whether the diversity contract was at play in Queens and, if not, what racial dynamics were prominent. Interviewees were recruited through personal connections and online Queens community groups. The interview guide was identical to the Fort Bend guide. Six Queens respondents identified as non-Latinx white, 2 as Black, 7 as Latinx, 4 as Asian, and 1 as racially “other.” Five (one white, two Latinx, two Asian) interviewees were immigrants.

I use Queens as the comparison site because of its similarity to Fort Bend in terms of racial diversity and its contrast in socioeconomic composition – Fort Bend is more socioeconomically homogeneous than Queens, which is typical of suburbs and urban areas. In
addition to this difference, Fort Bend features residential integration whereas Queens features segregation. Rather than view these two differences as independent axes across which the communities differ, however, I view them as intertwined phenomenon. Community residential integration is almost exclusively a suburban phenomenon (Bader and Warkentien 2016; Rastogi 2020), meaning it typically occurs within socioeconomically homogeneous communities. Because of this empirical entwinement, I theorize that the difference between the sites in integration states is mostly a function of their suburban/urban status, though suburban location does not guarantee integration. I further discuss integration in relation to the socioeconomic climate in the conclusion.

I identify as white, and much research indicates that my race, gender, and background – as well as other characteristics about me – impact how respondents interact with me. Throughout the interviewing process, I paid close attention to potential interviewer effects, trying to gauge the degree to which my participants, especially those with non-white racial identities, appeared comfortable and open in speaking to me about race-related topics. My perceptions while conducting the interviews, as well as my analysis of the transcripts, lead me to believe that most interviewees felt comfortable sharing their feelings and perspectives with me. Many respondents, for instance, shared experiences of racism or negative feelings toward whites and even explicitly made comments regarding their level of comfort in speaking with me. Though I can never know with certainty how my identity influenced how my respondents interacted with me, I feel confident that my identity did not impact the interviews to the extent that I could not obtain the data necessary to answer my research questions.

Analysis
Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I analyzed the interviews using a system of memo writing and inductive, iterative coding in MAXQDA. Memo writing occurred during data collection and analysis. For coding, I first coded a subset of 50 interviews line-by-line, generating an extensive code list with a particular focus on findings that had emerged through memo writing. I then reviewed this list, organizing and unifying the codes around prominent themes related to my research questions. Each interview was then coded at least twice more as the final codes were further honed. This approach is based on the grounded theory approach but was tailored to fit the needs of my data and timeline of the project (i.e., multiple rounds of interviews with coding in between) (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In the results sections below, pseudonyms are used in place of respondents’ real names.

Findings

The Diversity Contract

Residents of all racial identities in Fort Bend share a common set of beliefs about their community: Unlike other places in America, Fort Bend has no racial tension or problems, and race does not shape residents’ opportunities or outcomes – there is no racial inequality. However, as I will detail below, race does matter in Fort Bend, and racial inequality is present. Despite these realities, residents together construct the image of a racially harmonious community by abiding by a set of beliefs and rules of interaction. I refer to these beliefs and rules as the diversity contract. I more formally outline the diversity contract as follows:

To create a community with (the appearance of) racial harmony, residents participate in the co-construction of a public reality that ignores larger racialized social structures of oppression and inequality. Incidents of racial tension must be cast as isolated, aberrant events. Feelings of exclusion and experiences of racism are not accepted as valid and should not be expressed.
Residents of Fort Bend abide by this unspoken diversity contract, similar to the social contract. According to the social contract theory, when individuals come together to form a society, they give up certain rights in order to access the protections and benefits of the state. In the same way, individuals within the diverse context of Fort Bend agree to certain beliefs and rules of interaction that make possible a peaceful community. The diversity contract enables the various racialized groups in the county to live together in peace. Were the broader racial context and structures of racism present in American society or the racism and inequality within the county itself to be acknowledged, a peaceful community would not be possible. Thus, to create a conflict-free community in which many groups of different racial and ethnic identities can access the benefits of Fort Bend, racial tension and oppression must not surface. Contrary to what many residents claim, the racial hierarchy has not been dismantled in Fort Bend; it has been obscured beneath a facade of racial harmony.

Under the diversity contract, residents must suspend belief that racism or white privilege exist in the community. Residents of color must act in public according to the ideas that race does not matter or affect their lives. Likewise, whites must give up actions and words that connote superiority. In the following sections, I detail the components of the diversity contract. I then assess whether the diversity contract is at play in a diverse but urban comparison site, Queens County, New York.

*Community Narrative of Racial Harmony*

When Fort Bend residents were asked to describe their community or discuss its diversity, a widely shared narrative emerged: Fort Bend is racially harmonious. Unlike other places in America, there is no racial tension among groups, and race does not shape people’s life chances and opportunities.
Kevin (Asian, 18) is the son of Chinese immigrants and was born and raised in Fort Bend. I interviewed him the summer after he graduated from a Fort Bend high school. When asked how he would describe Fort Bend to a person who has never been there, he said,

I'd tell them it’s like - to an extent it almost feels like the American Dream. Economically, it's a fairly well-off area. And it's also one of those places where there's a lot of different ethnic groups existing together but you don't hear about, you know, the sort of racial tensions that you otherwise might on the news. So, it's a nice place to live.

For Kevin, the two most important elements of Fort Bend are its affluence and its diversity. Importantly, however, he distinguishes Fort Bend from other places by its relative racial harmony. Unlike other places with “racial tensions,” Fort Bend is able to be diverse but not tense, making it a “nice place to live.”

For another interviewee, Natalia (Latinx, 42), discussing Fort Bend’s racial harmony brought tears. Natalia and her husband immigrated from Mexico approximately 20 years ago and lived in Arizona before moving to Fort Bend seven years ago. In Arizona, Natalia felt isolated as a Latinx immigrant and unwelcome by the white community. When she and her family moved to Fort Bend for her husband’s new job, one of her first experiences left an indelible impression:

I remember the first time that I entered a store, I don't remember which store, I just remember that a lady told me, “How can I help you, sweetie?” Or something like that. And she said “sweetie,” and I almost cried. It was so funny, because I was like, “She called me sweetie!” That's one of the things that I remember.

As Natalia recounted this story in the interview, she became choked up with emotion. To her, the simple kindness of the term “sweetie” by a white sales clerk indicated a level of inclusion that she had never felt in Arizona. In Fort Bend, Natalia has a diverse group of friends and feels “welcome.” Differences in mundane everyday experiences in Fort Bend compared to Arizona lead Natalia to conclude that “it’s very different in Fort Bend.” In addition, the large immigrant population in the community leads Natalia to connect with others through that
experience: “I felt that I fit in because I was one more immigrant, not just a Latina, you know? That is the thing that make [sic] me feel welcome.”

Shauna (Black, 43) was raised in Houston and moved to Fort Bend with her husband six years ago so their three children could attend FBISD schools. Like Natalia, Shauna noted multiple times that she feels “welcome” in Fort Bend, and her description typified those of other residents. In describing the community, she joked, “It’s kind of hard to feel out of place in Sugar Land. Go to the mall – who have we left out at this point?” Shauna spoke at length about her diverse neighborhood and how she and her family enjoy learning about the different national and cultural backgrounds of their neighbors. During Ramadan, her Muslim neighbors invite them over for meals and celebrations. Likewise, another neighbor, who immigrated from China and previously owned a Chinese restaurant, frequently shares her cooking with them. Shauna’s examples of when she notices the diversity of the community illustrate her enjoyment of living in a diverse environment and the relative harmony that she perceives. She recounted,

I was at the gym and I realized that just in the time I was at the gym I heard four or five different languages. It was funny because there was a woman dealing with her kids in French and another one dealing with her kids in Arabic. You can always tell a mom griping out her kids no matter what language she uses [laughs] […] To me, that's kind of neat. In the course of my day, just at the grocery store or at the gym or somewhere else, I may hear four or five different languages.

Despite differences in native language, Shauna perceives similarities between herself and others in the community. Shauna went on to compare these experiences to those she had when living in Chicago after college. Chicago felt “segregated” and less unified. When Shauna would go to a nice restaurant in Chicago, she “felt like I was being stared at” but notes that “I don’t feel that here.” For Shauna, Fort Bend is a unique environment in which she can truly take part in and enjoy a diverse community.
Irma (Latinx, 57), immigrated to America from Cuba with her family when she was an infant and grew up in Chicago. She and her husband moved to Fort Bend in 2000 for work and to raise their daughter. Similar to Kevin, Fort Bend’s racial peace was one of the most important aspects of the community for Irma:

I would say that Fort Bend County is - I would call it a United Nations. You know, there’s people from all walks of life that pray together, that play together, that work together, that have fun together, and that’s, I think, what describes Fort Bend County in my opinion [...] I think it’s important for people to realize how well this diverse group of different folks are all getting along, you know? I mean, in times when people are racially profiled, and in times when our nation is so divided in so many different ways and there are communities fighting in our nation for different things, we don’t seem to have [that].

Irma’s likening of the community to the United Nations was common among residents. She perceives integration among the various groups in Fort Bend in their activities, and she emphasized multiple times throughout her interview how important it is for outsiders to understand that Fort Bend is unique. During a time of heightened national attention to race, in Fort Bend “folks are all getting along.”

In addition to racial harmony, another element of the shared community narrative was that race does not structure people’s opportunities or outcomes in Fort Bend. In other words, the community does not have racial inequality. Joe (Asian, 21) is a college student who has lived in Fort Bend since he was eight when his parents, Filipino immigrants, moved the family there from a disadvantaged neighborhood in Houston. Reflecting on Fort Bend, he notes,

It has a lot of opportunities. It has a lot of – what’s it called? I think there is mobility. Especially here, though, I think you need the [college] degree for it. I think it’s pretty much essential if you’re gonna mobilize within, you know, your job or your career. That’s necessary, and it has nothing to do with race here, in my opinion. And that’s the beauty of it because that’s what you’re looking for is for people not to care about your race but to care about what you made for yourself. And that’s important.

For Joe, the “beauty” of Fort Bend is that people are judged by their accomplishments, not their race. He understands that Fort Bend is an exclusive community – one cannot achieve the
economic status necessary to live there without a college degree – yet that itself is part of the appeal. One can successfully access the exclusive, successful community on educational merits alone.

Residents’ pride in Fort Bend and belief that the community is racially harmonious result in a feeling of exceptionalism not only to distant places like Chicago or Arizona but also to neighboring suburbs and the city of Houston. Most residents defined Fort Bend’s uniqueness by comparing it to nearby places. Kevin, for instance, contrasted his description of Fort Bend as the “American Dream” to his experiences in Houston, where he and his parents have experienced racism in restaurants for talking in Chinese amongst themselves: “We mainly speak in Chinese and you sort of get the idea that the waitstaff are less inclined to just converse with you than with other white families.” He made it clear that he does not experience this in Fort Bend. Irma likewise noted that “I can’t really think of an area in Fort Bend off the top of my head that is not diverse” and contrasted Fort Bend to Houston, which she views as more segregated, or “cliquey.” Residents also derive a feeling of moral superiority from Fort Bend’s diversity relative to less diverse parts of Houston. The Woodlands, a similarly affluent but predominantly white (84 percent) northern suburb of Houston was often used as foil to convey this moral differentiation. When explaining how she decided to move to Fort Bend, for example, Shauna noted, “We didn’t want to be in an either all black or all white neighborhood. So, like, I wouldn't have moved to the Woodlands [laughs].” Together, the contrasts residents drew to places near and far helped them define Fort Bend as a racially exceptional place.

When asked to describe their community and discuss diversity and race relations specifically, virtually all residents praised Fort Bend’s diversity and described it as racially
harmonious – or at least having the appearance of racial harmony. In general, residents asserted that race does not structure access to public space and there is little threat of overt racism or racial conflict as they live their everyday lives. A critical element of accomplishing this is the de-politicization of race and a neoliberal commodification of diversity, also critical elements of the diversity ideology (Mayorga-Gallo 2019). Racial differences are readily acknowledged and celebrated, but they are stripped of their political meaning. For residents, diversity in the community along national, religious, and cultural lines facilitates this and produces a “condensation” effect whereby all forms of difference are collapsed into cultural differences (Thomas 2018). Despite the de-politicization of race through the diversity contract, race is not optional (Waters 1990). That is, race is not perceived as an identity to make relevant or irrelevant depending on the situation. According to the terms of the diversity contract, race is real, racial differences are important and celebrated, but these differences are not meaningful with respect to opportunities or life chances.

Experiencing Surface Tension: Don’t Talk about Racial Inequality

The apparent racial peace in Fort Bend is not the result of a true absence of racial problems; the reality is more complex than this. The experienced lack of racial tension that residents described is the result of the set of beliefs and rules – the terms of the diversity contract – that does not allow for discussion of racial problems. These rules become more apparent when individuals’ experiences are incongruent with the constructed peaceful surface of the community – when they experience surface tension.

Priya (Asian, 33) is a second-generation Indian American who has lived in Fort Bend since she was a young child. Priya has experienced immense anxiety and frustration over the past

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6 In total, only 3 of 109 respondents did not express positive views of Fort Bend’s diversity. Two were white – a 51-year-old woman and a 68-year-old man. One was Latinx – a 72-year-old woman.
few years after having what she describes as a racial awakening. A few years ago, she started reading books like the autobiography of Malcolm X and Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* and became aware of how racism has shaped America’s past and present. She experiences great tension, however, because she perceives that these realities cannot be discussed in Fort Bend:

So for the last three years, I’ve been in a one-third life crisis because I’m telling you [about this], but I cannot talk about this with the average person, so I don’t say anything. Sometimes I will if I sense that somebody can identify with me. Last year, I went to a few different therapists because I’m like, “I don’t know. I just want to talk about my life and what I think.”

Priya feels that more racial tension would exist if what was beneath the peaceful surface became apparent. When Trayvon Martin came up in a recent group discussion, someone gave a response affirming Fort Bend’s racial harmony:

Some guy that I talked to, he’s like, “Good thing that doesn’t happen here. We don’t have that problem here.” And I’m like, “Well, if people told you what they think, we might have that problem here.”

Priya is acutely aware of the social rules that prevent her from discussing racial issues in Fort Bend. Though she represents an extreme case, the fact that she sought therapy to discuss her thoughts and feelings about race bring to light the presence of the unspoken but understood rule that racism and racial inequality are not to be brought to the surface. Doing so would disrupt the carefully constructed peace.

In September 2018, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights released the results of a six-year investigation that concluded that the Fort Bend Independent School District (FBISD), the primary school district in Fort Bend, disproportionately disciplined Black students: Black students were given out-of-school suspensions at a rate six times higher than white students and in-school suspensions at a rate four times higher (August 2018). Rhonda (Black, 42)
is a Missouri City native and is currently raising two children as a single mother in Richmond. Her children attend FBISD schools, and Rhonda believes that her daughter was racially targeted in her school’s extended day program through excessive discipline: “I think she was labeled. I think she was treated differently because she’s Black.” As a result of this experience and what she feels was an inadequate response by the school district, Rhonda, her mother, and her sister have all had to adjust their schedules so that her daughter no longer has to attend extended day. In addition to her daughter’s experiences, Rhonda also explained that she feels she was delayed in getting a promotion at her current job – she was only promoted after white colleagues with fewer qualifications and less experience were promoted – because of her race.

After Rhonda shared these experiences in her interview, I asked her if she spoke about these topics with others. Rhonda replied, “Maybe my family, but definitely not at work. You can’t - definitely not at work and definitely not with people that are not my family or close friends.” Rhonda is very aware of the expectation that she should not share her views on race or experiences of racism with those outside of a close, trusted circle. She abides by the community norms that these experiences should not be discussed, but this necessitates distance at work and in other social settings. Though she has worked for her company for 16 years, she does not consider any co-workers friends, and she does not participate in social events like happy hours. In addition, she explained that she does not try to make friends with the parents of other children on her daughter’s local sports team. Rhonda participates in maintaining the illusion of a racially harmonious community because she abides by the rules and does not seek validation of or justice for her experiences of racism.

Though norms of racial harmony lead to the expectation among most residents of color that they will not experience racism in their daily lives, they can also invoke anxiety. Joe, the
Filipino college student, explained that because of the expectation that residents must act racially tolerant in public, he cannot discern when people do in fact hold racist beliefs and attitudes:

Obviously, everyone gets along here, but at the same time, I feel like there’s some people who are low-key very conservative about things, and because we all kind of cherish diversity and culture, no one really wants to like speak out racially against you or, you know, put that ill will towards you or make you feel uncomfortable – but they still have those feelings. You know, no matter where you go, no one’s 100% gonna be on board with tolerance and acceptance, but you know the people are out there and it’s a little scary in Sugar Land because you can’t read it. I feel like that’s it – I can’t read it.

Because the community expectation is that all residents “cherish diversity,” racism becomes socially unacceptable in public. For Joe, however, that fact is “scary” because he cannot know when he is interacting with someone who internally harbors racist beliefs. He contrasts the uncertainty he feels in Fort Bend with his experiences in nearby suburban city Katy, where racism is less “hush-hush.” Though Joe finds many aspects of Fort Bend to be positive, the double-edged sword of the community’s constructed racial harmony is that he must “watch for” hidden racism.

Richard (white, 27) and Derek (Black, 25) both grew up in Fort Bend, moved away for college and work, and have recently moved back to the community. Both believe that racial issues do exist in Fort Bend but are not readily evident. After living in a small Midwestern city in which racial socioeconomic differences were stark, Richard felt that the general affluence in Fort Bend made it less racially tense:

I think that because race’s effect on your socioeconomic status isn’t as obvious for most, and because race’s effect on geography isn’t as obvious for most, there’s less very clear tension. I think there’s still - I mean, we still live in America. There’s still that history and current reality, so it’s still there, but it’s less visceral.

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7 Part of the city of Katy is within the boundary of Fort Bend County; however, most residents do not consider it to be part of Fort Bend, primarily because it is not a part of the Fort Bend Independent School District. When Katy was discussed in interviews, it was usually spoken of a separate, non-Fort Bend suburban area.
Richard believes that the relative affluence of all racialized groups in Fort Bend obscures the fact that racial inequality does exist in the community by making it less “visceral.”

Derek perceives a similar dynamic. He spent much of his childhood in Fort Bend but moved to a large Northeastern city for college. He recently moved back to Fort Bend for work, and he explicitly compared the racial atmosphere in Fort Bend with what he experienced in the Northeast. Commenting on Fort Bend, he said, “It is so peaceful. It is so peaceful-seeming, at least. People are nicer.” Derek further hints at the dynamics of the diversity contract in comparing Fort Bend to his experiences in the urban Northeast:

People in [the Northeast] were far more aware of what was going on in their community and more vocal about their dissidence to what was going on in the community. Here that’s not the case. We have people who are far more passive. We have people who are way more comfortable in not knowing things and in ignoring reality in some ways. […] It’s really because we prefer to be ignorant, you know? And to brush things under the rug.

Derek explains that Fort Bend has less overt racial tension than big Northeastern cities, but he does not attribute this to a lack of racial problems in Fort Bend. Instead, he believes that racial problems and tensions are kept “under the rug,” giving the appearance of harmony.

In all, 20 respondents (18 percent) were like Priya, Rhonda, Joe, Richard, and Derek and expressed an understanding that to some extent the racial harmony they perceived in Fort Bend was shallow or that racial conflict, tension, or inequality existed “beneath the surface.” Of these 20 respondents, 9 were Black, 6 were Asian, 3 were Latinx, and 2 were white. Respondents of color were much more likely than white respondents to perceive that the community’s racial peace only on the surface; however, the majority of respondents of all racialized groups did not question the community’s racial harmony.

The racial peace constructed in Fort Bend comes at a cost. Maintenance of the calm veneer prohibits going deeper, where racial issues do lie. Thus, the terms of the diversity contract
also require ignorance from residents, shaping fundamentally the way they perceive their community. The diversity contract requires a specific ignorance – ignoring the fact that U.S. society is structured by white supremacy – and asks residents of color to take part. The broader Racial Contract, the contract in which whites agree to relegate non-whites to an inferior moral and civil status (Mills 1997), cannot be recognized. What is unique in the diversity contract is that, instead of requiring only whites as signatories, the diversity contract coerces ignorance (Mueller 2018) from residents of color and requires them to take part in the “knowing-unknowing” (Jung 2015:143) as well. In order for the community to function and for all residents to reap its benefits, everyone must engage in the ignorance required to create a “racial fantasy land” (Mills 1997:18). Though racial ignorance enacts a toll on all who engage in it, the psychological toll of acting ignorant – or in actually believing the claims of the contract – is greater for residents of color.

Violations of the Diversity Contract

One way that community rules and norms become most apparent is when they are broken. Thus, we can also clearly see the diversity contract in action by studying instances in which the contract is violated and offenders are policed or punished.

Linda (white, 53) has lived in Sugar Land for over 20 years and raised her two sons there with her husband. She senses a violation of the diversity contract in an everyday encounter at her son’s baseball game. She and the other mostly white team parents sit together in the bleachers, and she describes the actions of one Black player’s father at these games:

[His] dad always comes to the games: “Hey, what’s up, white folk?” So he makes it that way. I don’t - I really like him. He’s a great guy. Why do you have to say that when you come in? Why are you making that - we know we’re white. You’re Black. But why do you have to say it?
The teammate’s father violated the diversity contract by drawing attention to the fact that the baseball team is predominantly white. Linda is frustrated by this mention, asking multiple times why the father has to “say that.” Through his violation of the rule that racial problems – in this case, racial segregation in social activities – should not be discussed, the father disrupts the community’s appearance of racial harmony.

Another aspect of the diversity contract is that whites must repress feelings of superiority or racism – at least publicly – as prejudice and racism disrupt the image of racial harmony. Donna (white, 53) describes an incident that she experienced one Saturday afternoon at Costco. She told me,

I went to Costco one day when it just opened, and there’s a lot of Indian people there. It’s on a Saturday. It was packed. And this man, this angry, old white man probably around my age walked up and said, “Well, don’t you just feel like you need a passport in here?” And I was just like, “Ok, I don’t know you. Get away from me.” I don’t like that. I don’t have any tolerance for that.

The white man in Costco violated the diversity contract by making an openly racist comment in public. Donna’s reaction (“get away from me”) indicates that he violated the rules of interaction in the area. Donna returned to this incident many times throughout our interview. She remained appalled that the man felt that it was appropriate to make that comment. Just as residents of color are required to bury feelings and experiences of exclusion and discrimination, so too are whites required to keep their own racial feelings out of public interactions.

The diversity contract is also violated when individuals try to move beyond abstract, positive talk about diversity to discuss racial issues. Allison (Asian, 27) is a daughter of the pastor of an intentionally diverse Christian church in Fort Bend. The model for the church, which began around a decade ago, was “not just being a church where we coexist but really trying to go deep into racial reconciliation.” The church, which initially fostered a racially diverse
congregation, engaged in strategies like including diverse styles of worship in its services and hosting viewing parties and discussions about movies and documentaries that engaged racial topics. Allison’s recounting of the church’s struggles over the past decade indicate that the church’s core mission violated the diversity contract. Allison explained,

I think people take a lot of pride in being diverse, but when you get down to like the hard, nitty-gritty of what that means, you don’t want to talk about it. […] Over time, a mix of things happened, but one of those things was that people realized how hard it was and didn’t really want to be part of it anymore. So a lot of people who left our church have ended up at larger churches like [large Baptist church], which is diverse, but it’s more like coexisting.

Though members were initially enthusiastic about joining a diverse church, which is in line with the pro-diversity norms of the community, Allison explains that over time many members have left when asked to engage with talk of real racial issues like racism or racial inequality.

Critically, members did not retreat to racially segregated churches, but instead moved to other racially diverse churches in which “coexisting” is the norm and the diversity contract is not violated. When I visited Allison’s church in July 2018, only 13 people attended the service, whereas several of the diverse congregations that past members now attend measure in the thousands. We can understand the struggles of this church through the lens of the diversity contract. Asking members to discuss broader structures of racial oppression in society violated the narrative that racism is not relevant in Fort Bend because there is racial harmony. As Allison later noted, people only “want to talk about the happy-happy stuff.”

**Why the Diversity Contract Emerges**

We have seen that the diversity contract operates in the nation’s most diverse suburban county with almost no disturbance. Seemingly, at least in public, nearly everyone agrees to the terms of the contract. But why? As described earlier, Fort Bend is perceived by most to be one of
The Diversity Contract

if not the top community within the Houston region. Most respondents expressed a sense of accomplishment and success when describing their move to Fort Bend. Importantly, there is not a comparable, non-diverse alternative. I theorize that the diversity contract is at play in Fort Bend precisely because it is a highly selective, socioeconomically homogeneous – and therefore desirable – community, and it enables the community to “work.” That is, the diversity contract emerges as a local racial ideology in order to maintain white privilege while also protecting the desirability of the community –which is itself necessary to uphold the privilege of local white residents.

Suburban governments engage in exclusionary strategies with the goal of limiting access to those who are economically advantaged. To the degree to which they are successful, highly selective communities form. This has two consequences. First, highly selective suburban communities have limited economic inequality within their boundaries. This results in residents whose everyday contexts consist of mostly people like them. In a racially diverse suburb, this means that individuals live among and interact with people of other racialized groups who are of a similar economic status. Second, selective, successful suburban communities are highly desirable to metropolitan residents, and most who move into them feel a sense of accomplishment. That is, the residents of these communities feel a sense of pride and success for their ability to access the community. This is the case in Fort Bend. When I asked residents if they ever considered leaving the community, most answered quickly in the negative. Within their metropolitan region, the residents of Fort Bend saw themselves as the winners.

I theorize that these related factors – selectivity and resulting socioeconomic homogeneity and desirability – lead to the formation of the diversity contract. Once they have “achieved” Fort Bend, the economically advantaged residents have a strong incentive to make
that community function well. Their economic and social investments in the community – in homes, neighborhoods, and social networks – make them co-benefactors of its success. Diversity in this context must be managed in such a way that it does not cause division or problems within the community. In a highly desirable environment, the terms of the diversity contract, though they carry a cost, are worth abiding by, as evidenced by residents’ choice to live in Fort Bend as well as the strong adherence to the contract found among respondents. In this context, diversity must be valued and protected as an asset in the abstract and focus on racial inequality or racism is not permitted, lest they disrupt the success of the community.

Queens: Diverse but No Diversity Contract

To test my theory that Fort Bend’s selectivity and resulting socioeconomic homogeneity lead to the emergence of the diversity contract, I also conducted interviews at a comparison site theoretically chosen for demographic features that would allow me to adjudicate these claims. Queens County, New York, is similarly diverse to Fort Bend but, as is characteristic of urban communities, economically heterogeneous. It is not highly selective and therefore not one of the most desirable communities in the New York City region. If the diversity contract is present in Queens, then socioeconomic homogeneity is not necessary for the diversity contract to emerge. If it is not present, then the comparison provides suggestive evidence in support of my theory.

Is the diversity contract present in a socioeconomically heterogeneous diverse urban community? No. In contrast to Fort Bend, there is no illusion of racial harmony in Queens. Though every respondent expressed positive views of the area’s diversity, all also regularly drew attention to racial tensions within their community. Jenny (white, 23) lives with her grandfather in Flushing, an area of Queens that was predominantly white for most of the 20th century but is
now majority Asian. When asked to describe her community, Jenny said she would “describe it as a place with some racial tension.” When I asked her how she came to that conclusion, she replied,

I hear it. […] It’s comments on how Asian people drive and how Asian people are tearing down the homes in the neighborhood and ruining it, and like what a shame that like all the American grocery stores are going out of business and replaced by H-Mart [Asian-American supermarket]. […] It’s random people sometimes, and it’s also my family members who are like, “We belong in Flushing, because it’s ours, blah, blah, blah.” Yeah, it’s just - I’ll be stopped on my bike at an intersection, and someone [Asian] will pull some bad driving move, and a white person next to me will be like, “See that?”

Both in public and within her family, Jenny feels a tension between the white and Asian residents in her community. Incidents of racial conflict in public among strangers were commonly observed by Queens residents. Nathan (Asian, 23) recounted an event that occurred on his subway line one morning. A pregnant Chinese woman entered the train car, and Nathan got up to give her his seat. Before she could sit down, however, a Latinx woman took the seat. Nathan explained what occurred next:

The pregnant Chinese woman just yelled, and she [Latinx woman] like whispered in Spanish under her breath. And then the Spanish lady started arguing with her, and she started saying like, “There's so many of us and so little of you.” I'm like, “Don't – it’s 7 AM. Don’t start a race war.”

The event on the train was racialized by the participants, rather than being interpreted as a non-racialized interpersonal conflict. This was common in accounts by Queens residents. Conflicts or misunderstandings among residents of different racial identities would often escalate into racial comments, such as the Latinx woman’s statement that “There’s so many of us and so little of you.”

Paula (Latinx, 41), is the daughter of Colombian immigrants and lives in the neighborhood of Jackson Heights, which has prominent Latinx and Asian populations, though
they largely reside in separate parts of the community. Paula recounted that she stopped shopping at a certain grocery store on the Asian side because she did not feel welcome there:

    I stopped going to a supermarket there because the fishmongers were just so rude. Like I could be literally standing in line for 15, 20 minutes, and they would take care of all their other – like their own Asian kind above me. And I stopped going there because there’s nobody I could complain to. There was no manager. Nobody spoke English, and I stopped visiting that store.

Though the Paula’s experience and the conflict on the train between two people of color witnessed by Nathan have very different power ramifications than Jenny’s witnessing of white racism in a system of white supremacy, these examples illustrate that in diverse Queens moments of interpersonal conflict – a driving maneuver, taking a subway seat – are often read through a racial lens and assigned a larger racial meaning. While Fort Bend residents viewed their diverse community as racially harmonious and exceptional for having no racial tensions or racial inequality, Queens residents did not share this narrative. Though most felt positively about the area’s diversity, they did not see Queens as an exception to the country’s pervasive racial inequality. When I asked Kosta (Greeks, 29), a Queens native, if he feels that there is racial inequality in Queens, he responded,

    Yeah. Definitely when you notice how – I mean, again, this is something that I wouldn't say is exclusive to Queens, but it's something generally that I notice in New York City, mainly being like neighborhoods that are more affluent and white tend to get, you know, better social services, tend to have better infrastructure and a better quality of life than areas that are predominantly people of color [...] Generally speaking, if you are white in America and even here in New York City, a lot of the problems that you'll face in your - I mean you can definitely face struggles in life – but they won't be directly tied to your ethnic or racial makeup.

Kosta and other Queens residents perceived racial inequality in Queens that is similar to the inequality found in the rest of the United States. Another Queens resident, Sabrina (Latinx,

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8 Kosta, the son of Greek immigrants, did not identify with any U.S. Census racial categories. His primary identity was Greek, and he selects “Other” on racial identity questions.
26) noted, “As diverse as Queens is, and as much as I love it here, there is [racial] inequality.” In Queens, the presence of diversity did not mean that racial issues were absent or that racial inequality had been eradicated. Jenny, in discussing what living in a diverse community means to her, noted, “I don’t think that living in a more racially diverse place necessarily means that there’s more sense of integration, sense of shared identity, or necessarily lower racial tensions.”

The beliefs and social rules arising from the diversity contract present in Fort Bend that create a racially harmonious everyday environment are absent in Queens. Queens residents do not share a common narrative that their community is racially harmonious but instead regularly drew attention to racial tensions and conflicts within the community, a finding in line with other work on diverse urban neighborhoods (Burke 2012). Further, there is no illusion that racial inequality is absent from the community. Overall, the findings from Queens are consistent with my theory that selectivity resulting in socioeconomic homogeneity are necessary conditions for the diversity contract.

**Conclusions and Discussion**

*A Constructed “Peace”*

Over the past half century, America has undergone rapid racial and ethnic diversification and suburbanization, resulting in growing numbers of diverse suburbs. Diverse communities are often heralded as examples of racial progress and an indication of the eradication – or lessening – of racial inequality. Through an analysis specifically focused on connecting local material conditions to ideology through the Racial Contract framework, I document the racial dynamics at play in Fort Bend County, Texas, one of the most diverse suburban counties in the United States. I show that, counter to the hopes placed on diverse communities, in this highly selective, diverse suburb a place-specific racial ideology has emerged to maintain the broader racial structure of
American society in a context of local diversity. This ideology, which I term the diversity contract, adapts to a context in which whites and people of color live in close proximity and have similar socioeconomic statuses.

The diversity contract is comprised of beliefs and interactional rules that together construct the appearance of a racially peaceful community with no racial inequality. Residents report that the community has little to no racial tension. In addition, despite a reality to the contrary (see Table 1), residents maintain a belief that race does not structure people’s opportunities or outcomes in the community. These beliefs result in a feeling of exceptionalism: Though other communities have racial problems, Fort Bend has overcome them. However, deeper analysis of residents’ experiences reveals that the community’s racial harmony is constructed through not allowing racial inequality to be recognized and by dismissing any instance of racism as an isolated anomaly. Residents abide by these rules of interaction and police those who violate the them. The disciplining of violators and the obscuring of racial inequality are indications of the strength of the diversity contract. This local racial ideology goes far beyond creating the kind of surface-level civility that have been documented in some diverse contexts like “cosmopolitan canopies” and fundamentally shapes the way that residents perceive and feel about their community (Anderson 2011).

**Extending the Diversity Contract**

Using Mill’s (1997) Racial Contract framework, which posits that across different contexts racial ideology will adapt to local conditions to maintain and obscure white supremacy, I theorize that high diversity in the context of socioeconomic selectivity and homogeneity provide the conditions necessary for the diversity contract to emerge. I find preliminary support
for this theory through documenting that the diversity contract is not present in Queens, a highly
diverse but less selective and therefore socioeconomically heterogeneous community.

Demographic trends also provide suggestive and indirect support for this theory: Diverse
and integrated suburbs are more socioeconomically advantaged – and therefore more selective –
than the average suburb (Douds and Rastogi 2020). Why is integration not sustained under other
community conditions? I posit that the answer may lie in the diversity contract. By constructing
racial harmony, the diversity contract may enable sustained integration in communities with
“desirable diversity” (Berrey 2015). The terms of the contract dictate that individuals should be
open to – and in fact desire – racially diverse neighborhoods. In highly selected, affluent
communities such as Fort Bend, these terms are worth the benefits received from residing in such
a desirable community. In communities that are not highly selected, white flight or other
segregation processes may prevent diversification and integration.

Though the comparison with Queens and demographic trends together provide initial
support for my theory, comparison with other types of communities will be necessary for further
refinement. Case studies are useful for theory generation and rich description, but assessment of
dynamics in similar suburbs as well as other theoretically chosen comparison cases should be
conducted to further clarify and validate my findings. Because racial ideology arises in relation
to specific place conditions to maintain white domination, it is likely that the diversity contract
may look slightly different depending on varying conditions in other advantaged, diverse
suburbs, such as regional variations in social norms. More work is needed to document the extent
to which the diversity contract operates and its variations across places. Because racial ideology
is intricately linked to local conditions, our study of racial ideology must be flexible enough to
account for this.
Based on my analysis, I predict that the diversity contract will also be at play in other types of highly desirable and selective diverse contexts. For instance, in highly selective organizations with a diverse workforce, the diversity contract may govern interactions. The diversity contract in organizational contexts may be buttressed by what previous research has identified as diversity rhetoric in which organizational actors praise diversity but do not implement any concrete mechanisms to create racial equity (Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001; Kelly and Dobbin 1998). Prior research on diversity in successful organizations provides some suggestive evidence of the diversity contract being at play (Berrey 2015). However, Warikoo (2016) found that in an elite university environment, while white students praised diversity abstractly, students of color were largely skeptical and unaccepting of university narratives about race. This raises the important question of how much diversity is required for the diversity contract to emerge. In a highly desirable context in which diversity is celebrated but people of color are still a small statistical minority, the diversity contract may not be necessary. That is, people of color’s cooperation may not be needed to ensure the success of the organization. In highly diverse contexts such as Fort Bend, all groups must participate in order to maintain the desirable environment.

The Diversity Contract and Racial Inequality

To conclude, I discuss the local and broader implications of the diversity contract for racial inequality. Locally, the diversity contract itself creates racial inequality by exacting an unequal cost from residents of color. The terms of the contract mean that residents of color cannot share or discuss experiences of racism because doing so would violate the narrative that

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9 Many residents of Fort Bend may in fact work in such organizations, such as engineering firms or hospitals. In this case, the terms of the diversity contract would govern both their residential and professional lives, each possibly strengthening the other.
Fort Bend is racially peaceful. When residents of color do face discrimination or stigmatization, there is no avenue by which it may be recognized, validated, or, most importantly, addressed, except in private, trusted circles. When Rhonda’s daughter experienced racism in after-school care, no school district authorities acknowledged or validated it, and she and her family members were burdened with creating a new arrangement to protect her daughter.

Though all residents reap rewards in the community, the price of these rewards does not fall equally across all residents. Indeed, in many ways it is residents of color who must do the real work of assuring whites that all is well and there are no racial problems. This work shields whites from having to face the racism and inequality present within their own community (DiAngelo 2011).

As a dominant racial ideology, the diversity contract also obscures racial inequality in the community. At the time that I began interviewing in June 2017, of the five most powerful Fort Bend County government elected officials – the County Judge, the Commissioners Court, and sheriff – 4 were white. Less than a handful of people raised this mostly white government leadership in our interviews as an example of racial inequality. In fact, many respondents made inaccurate claims that local government officials represented the racial diversity in the county. The belief that the community is racially harmonious enabled false perceptions of diversity in county leadership.

In June 2018, when the Department of Education released its findings that FBISD has been disproportionately disciplining Black students, the school district barely acknowledged the finding. In fact, in their press release, they misrepresented the findings and stated that the Department of Education “did not make any finding that the District discriminated against any students and did not otherwise identify any wrongdoing,” which was true only in technicality
Despite coverage in major newspapers, the finding barely registered for most residents and parents. Under the diversity contract, people must act as though racial inequality does not exist in the community. How then can residents respond to information that it does? In these situations, the diversity contract sweeps racial problems under the rug.

The construction of racial harmony may make any form of racial progress more difficult, as it is taboo to even recognize the existence of racism or racial injustice. As the diverse church illustrates, discussion of racial inequality is not acceptable because it violates the terms of the contract. Collective discussion or action is thus thwarted, and instead residents must make sense of and struggle against racial oppression as individuals. The celebration of diversity and strong adherence to the belief that Fort Bend has no racial inequality leaves inequalities like those in local political representation, school discipline, or socioeconomic resources (see Table 2) hiding in plain sight.

How strong is the diversity contract? What types of violations can it successfully punish and “correct,” and what violations would rupture it irreparably? What happens, for instance, if people of color were to politically organize and achieve their fair share of representation in local governments and institutions? Would the narrative that Fort Bend is racially harmonious still stand? The explosive growth of Fort Bend over the past three decades means that most of its residents are transplants – they did not grow up in Fort Bend. This lack of local history for most can make collective action and group solidarity difficult, but people of color ran for – and won – a record number of political offices in Fort Bend in 2018 (Lewis and Snyder 2018). If the purpose of the diversity contract is to maintain white dominance amidst diversity, did it fail? Or can the ideology adapt to these circumstances and continue to advantage whites even with diverse leadership? Future research must explore the limits of the diversity contract.
Lewis Mumford, a staunch opponent of suburban communities, wrote that “in the suburb one might live and die without marring the image of an innocent world” (1961:494). In highly selective communities in which the diversity contract is at play, racial inequality is obscured. This affects how residents think about racial inequality more broadly. Fort Bend has successful residents of every racialized group from most regions of the world. To residents who look at their community and see this diversity, it does appear to be the “American Dream” – that as long as you work hard to get a good education and job, you can attain success regardless of your race. If people of all racialized groups can achieve the locational status of Fort Bend – the most desired location in the Houston region – then how is race a barrier to success? By obscuring the broader systems of racial inequality and oppression that exist in America – and in Fort Bend, though more subtly – highly selective communities can produce “structured ignorance” (Schwartz 1988) and become “accomplices” to colorblindness (Berrey 2015). Through the diversity contract, diverse suburbs curtail the possibility of recognizing and dismantling racialized systems of power. Instead, the very rules that create harmony in everyday interactions ensure that racial inequality lurking below the facade can never surface to be addressed.

Through this analysis, I have shown that suburban communities feature unique racial dynamics and challenges. As the majority of Black, Latinx, Asian, and white Americans are now suburbanites, more research is needed on race in suburban contexts. Here, I have theorized explicitly the link between the structure of suburban environments and spatially constituted understandings of and experiences with race. My findings show that the selectivity and resulting homogeneity of suburban landscapes create new challenges for reducing racial inequality because they make it less apparent. As suburbs continue to diversify, more communities may enter into the diversity contract to maintain peace.
Future research efforts should be devoted to investigating how racial equity can be achieved in suburban contexts, especially amidst multiple ongoing spatial transformations. Gentrification of central cities may push some low-income people of color into older, low-income suburbs (Brown-Saracino 2017). Within suburbia, movement to the suburban fringe, or exurbs, is rapid, and some worry it is a new form of white flight, though this is an open empirical question (Lichter and Ziliak 2017). Research must examine what racial ideologies govern interactions in this wide array of suburban contexts. Because varying place conditions lead to locally specific racial ideologies that create and maintain inequality in different ways, documenting these ideologies and identifying place-specific strategies for creating racial equity is critical for race research in the 21st century.
References


Figure 1. Fort Bend Racial and Ethnic Composition, 1980-2017

## Table 1. Population Characteristics by Race/Ethnicity in Fort Bend

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fort Bend</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latinx</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Non-Latinx White</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women (%)</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>53.0</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty rate (%)</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree (%)</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>39.0</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>51.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeownership (%)</td>
<td>78.1</td>
<td>70.3</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median HH income</td>
<td>$94,000</td>
<td>$76,000</td>
<td>$67,000</td>
<td>$116,000</td>
<td>$112,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median HH income - Ratio of U.S. median$</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Households above $150K (%)</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>34.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign born (%)</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Calculated by dividing the Fort Bend median household income for racialized group by the U.S. median household income for that group.
2 Black and Asian categories may include Latinx individuals, as these characteristics for Black and Asian people by Latinx identification are not available from the American Community Survey.

### Table 2. Racial and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Fort Bend Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latinx</th>
<th>Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>62 (57%)</td>
<td>18 (60%)</td>
<td>13 (59%)</td>
<td>14 (61%)</td>
<td>17 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>18-76</td>
<td>29-74</td>
<td>24-72</td>
<td>28-76</td>
<td>18-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS only</td>
<td>8 (7%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5 (22%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some coll./Associate's</td>
<td>17 (16%)</td>
<td>6 (20%)</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
<td>7 (30%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>40 (37%)</td>
<td>14 (47%)</td>
<td>9 (41%)</td>
<td>5 (22%)</td>
<td>12 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>44 (40%)</td>
<td>10 (33%)</td>
<td>12 (55%)</td>
<td>6 (26%)</td>
<td>16 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refused to say</td>
<td>3 (3%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $50,000</td>
<td>15 (14%)</td>
<td>2 (7%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
<td>9 (39%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 - $99,999</td>
<td>30 (28%)</td>
<td>6 (20%)</td>
<td>10 (45%)</td>
<td>6 (26%)</td>
<td>8 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 to $149,999</td>
<td>17 (16%)</td>
<td>6 (20%)</td>
<td>4 (18%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>5 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$150,000 or more</td>
<td>44 (40%)</td>
<td>16 (53%)</td>
<td>5 (23%)</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
<td>19 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fort Bend native</td>
<td>29 (27%)</td>
<td>5 (17%)</td>
<td>3 (14%)</td>
<td>8 (35%)</td>
<td>13 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign born</td>
<td>25 (23%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td>2 (9%)</td>
<td>7 (30%)</td>
<td>15 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>109</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td><strong>23</strong></td>
<td><strong>34</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix.
