



Hardening Racial Lines in Public Space

A Comment on the McKinney Pool Episode

Naomi Adiv

On Friday, June 5, Black teenagers in McKinney, Texas, were violently subdued by a police officer following a conflict that broke out at a community swimming pool—a place at which their presence provoked anxiety and then panic. Many interpretations of the officer’s behavior have turned on the question of who broke what rules, but geographer Naomi Adiv argues that the debate has deeper spatial—and racial—implications.

In the last few weeks, there has been much noise followed by much quiet regarding the recent episode in the town of McKinney, Texas,¹ in which a group of Black teenagers at a swimming pool in the private subdivision of Craig Ranch were detained—and in some cases, assaulted—by a police officer after an altercation broke out inside the pool grounds.² The precipitating incident was a fist fight that involved a number of people in attendance, which began when a middle-aged white resident of the area turned to a young Black woman and told her that she and her friends should “go back to Section 8 housing.” As the situation escalated, an employee of the pool called the police, whose arrival caused most of the teens to flee, while others were held, handcuffed or cursed at.

At this point, we have more details than we did when the story broke. What circulated then was simply the horrifying scene of a white police officer threatening Black youth outside of a pool with physical violence, both with a gun and by pinning one young woman to the ground. We know that the offending officer has resigned³ and that there has been a police investigation into his behavior. We know that the older white woman who started the argument has been suspended⁴ from her job.

And these consequences placed upon individuals are, in some sense, satisfying, particularly in a climate in which the officers responsible for the deaths of Eric Garner⁵ and Michael Brown⁶—among so many others—have not been indicted, nor even suspended from their jobs; a climate in which several of the Baltimore police officers responsible for the murder of Freddie Gray⁷ had track records of violence and misconduct. But in spite of a strong administrative reaction in *this* case, the

¹ See: www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000003728410/video-captures-incident-at-texas-pool.html?action=click>ype=vhs&version=vhs-heading&module=vhs®ion=title-area.

² The murder of nine church members at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, occurred as I was in the midst of writing this article. Both incidents are connected as violent expressions of anti-Black racism in the United States. In this article, however, I choose to remain focused on the pool in McKinney.

³ See: www.nytimes.com/2015/06/10/us/police-officer-in-mckinney-tex-resigns-over-incident-caught-on-video.html?_r=0.

⁴ See: www.dailykos.com/story/2015/06/10/1392082/-Woman-Involved-in-Starting-McKinney-Pool-Fight-Placed-on-Administrative-Leave-by-CoreLogic-Inc.

⁵ See: www.cbsnews.com/news/nypd-chokehold-death-grand-jury-votes-not-to-charge-cop-in-eric-garner-case.

⁶ See: www.nbcnews.com/storyline/michael-brown-shooting/ferguson-cop-darren-wilson-not-indicted-shooting-michael-brown-n255391.

⁷ See: www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/the-brutality-of-police-culture-in-baltimore/391158.

fact that police violence against Black people is once again in the news speaks to how common this behavior is, and how minimal the fear of repercussions in the majority of situations.

Here, I discuss how conflicts over public spaces—regardless of their regimes of ownership—can harden racial lines at a larger scale, such as a city or community, through the coordination of state and non-state systems of regulation and enforcement.

What counts as public space?

Since the story broke, we have heard the argument that, because the Craig Ranch pool was not technically a public space, people who should not have been there in the first place were rightfully ejected. Indeed, unlike many “community” pools, which belong to the local municipality (the state) and therefore permit entry to all comers, the Craig Ranch pool belongs to the homeowners’ association of the private 2,200-unit subdivision in which it is located. Neighbors of the pool have argued that official rules allow only two guests per visitor. This gathering, however, was promoted by a local young woman, who organizes parties and events, as a free deejayed party, held in the park beside the pool—with the implicit promise of free entry to the pool. Ads on Facebook and other social media attracted around 70 teens from around the area; some were residents of Craig Ranch, some not, though how one would distinguish between them is unclear. Further, some young people, agitated at not being let in, jumped the pool’s fence. And, indeed, homeowners’ associations and other private entities are entitled to establish and enforce their own rules.

But as someone who has parsed the meanings of public and private⁸ in terms of ownership in my scholarship, I contend that this argument, while perhaps true, misses the point. “Public” has meanings that shift around us all the time, based in part in legalistic notions of property ownership, but also around blurrier lines of access and belonging. How these lines are enforced often reflect our social world much more than the letter of the law.

The naturalization of racism by the rule

There are also those who argue that this incident was “not a race thing.” The name for this kind of post-racial logic is “disavowal.” It operates under the notion that if the breaking of a rule (i.e. the two-guest policy) occurred at McKinney pool, the reactions of the pool’s members, and of the police officers, are legitimate and don’t have anything to do with the uncodified larger “rules” of structural racism. This logic attributes a kind of purity to rules-based consequences, asserting that they operate evenly across race, class and gender. It naturalizes the provocations and violence at the McKinney pool as appropriate responses to badly behaved teens, thereby erasing them as manifestations of racism.

In an article published in *The Atlantic*⁹ the day after the incident, author Yoni Appelbaum (June 8, 2015) details the history of racism in American swimming pools as well. He cites historian Jeff Wiltse, whose excellent book *Contested Waters* (2007) offers a history of race and racism in America’s pools. From this, we glean that American pools were, at first, largely segregated by gender, but this had effectively ended by the 1920s. “Alarmed at the sight of women and men of different races swimming together,” Appelbaum notes, “public officials moved to impose rigid segregation.” When racial desegregation came in to municipal swimming pools in the 1950s, white families responded by establishing or joining private fee-based swim clubs that—explicitly or not—excluded Black families from membership.

⁸ See: www.metropolitiques.eu/Paying-to-Play-in-the-Mission.html.

⁹ See: www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/troubled-waters-in-mckinney-texas/395150/?utm_source=SFFB.

A place where anyone may reasonably enter

Some technical questions about what “counts” as public in the legal sphere are answered by Harris, Green and Gaskins in their paper in *The William Mitchell Law Raza Journal* (2012), in which they outline the history of civil-rights legislation in the United States, and the extent to which private organizations may exclude people of particular groups or classes. Specifically, they show how swimming pools have often been a proving ground for these issues of racial discrimination, as the inclusion of Black swimmers has raised anxiety in white members of “community” pools much like the one in McKinney. These authors explain that, since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the Supreme Court defines as “public” a place that provides “public accommodation” (p. 12) regardless of how it is held. Indeed, the state intervenes in “private” spaces all the time: private employers are not allowed to discriminate in hiring, nor are restaurants allowed to deny service to people based on race. Thus, the prohibition on discrimination extends to many instances in which the state does not own the land where a transaction is taking place.

Maintaining racialized spaces through violence

The pools issue, however, is just one example of the use of violence against Black people to maintain larger programs of spatial exclusion in cities. The imagery in the McKinney case is not new: a young Black woman, wearing only a bathing suit, is held down by a much larger white man who pins her on the ground with both knees on her back. She writhes and flails under his weight. As he speaks to the camera, to bystanders, to two young men who are sitting on the lawn, he seems incredibly self-possessed, assured that he is doing the right thing in order to maintain order, and his own authority.

Just more than a week later, on June 17, in the Cincinnati suburb of Fairfield, Ohio, a 12-year-old girl in a swimsuit and other members of her family were, at turns, cuffed and thrown up against a police car and pool fences in a dispute¹⁰ over inappropriate pool attire. One young woman was maced in the mouth, another had ribs broken.

In an attempt to make some sense of what happened in McKinney, Olga Khazan (June 9, 2015), writing in *The Atlantic*,¹¹ asserts that the conflict over the pool has to do with the rate at which the town has been experiencing demographic change in recent years. This incident demonstrates the contests over space compelled by race and class anxiety. To take this point further, in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), Katherine McKittrick notes that “race and racism are *serious* geographic projects and processes” (p. 11) that have a long history of being worked out through the bodies of Black women, and that “patterns of racial domination are *fundamentally* geographic” (p. 12, emphasis added). In the McKinney case, we see that access to space—whatever public designation it may have—and access to systems of power reinforce one another, allowing some bodies to dwell, and others not. In a moment of acute bodily harm, we see at work a logic by which presumptions of who is and is not “from the neighborhood” are asserted through violence against the body of a barely clothed, barely adult young woman.

So what is actually at issue here is not whether or not the teens were trespassing on club property (though it seems that many were not), but the circumstances under which a grown woman can turn to a young person and hurl racial insults, and then presume cover behind the place’s legal designation. What is at issue is whether an officer of the state, armed with a gun, moves to violence with impunity if he waves it at a group of teens coming to the aid of their friend. And these are at issue because we currently exist in a society in which a whole class of people fears either for their dignity or for their lives on a daily basis.

¹⁰ See: www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2015/06/17/fairfield-pool-incident-draws-complaints-of-excessive-force-by-police/28865691.

¹¹ See: www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/06/the-dark-side-of-mckinney-the-best-place-to-live-in-america/395372.

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