

Introduction | Or, Why I Love Mister Rogers

MY OBSESSION WITH the racial composition of neighborhoods probably began when I was four years old. For much of my childhood (until I was fourteen), my mother and I were the only nonwhite people for miles around in the Ventura, California, neighborhood where I grew up. Local police once told my mother that the location of our house was identified with a red pushpin on the map that hung on the precinct wall—not because they thought we would cause trouble, but because they were concerned that others might cause trouble for us. From what I have been told—and from what I remember—I integrated the El Camino Elementary School when I entered kindergarten. Until about fourth grade, when students were bused in from a predominantly Latino neighborhood, I remember only one other black child, and even with busing there were few students of color. My fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Romero, was the only nonwhite teacher.

Nothing overtly bad ever happened to us in our neighborhood, but I never quite felt like I fit in either. There were other children around. We went to school together and were even friendly; still, something always felt a little amiss. I remember seeking out playmates and play dates with little reciprocity. For example, there were few sleepovers for many of those years. In hindsight, I see that my sense of not fitting in, of being excluded, had much more to do with the attitudes of the parents than with the children themselves. I also have vivid memories of nearly every argument I was a part of turning racial. For some of my closest friends—and for my staunchest adversaries—the first stone to be thrown was the “N-word.”

I think it was this lack of predictability and subtle lack of a sense of belonging that made Mister Rogers so appealing to me. Throughout elementary school *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* was one of my favorite televi-

sion shows. In fact, to this day his theme song holds a special place in my heart:¹

It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood,
 A beautiful day for a neighbor.
 Would you be mine?
 Could you be mine?

This middle-aged white man was singing to *me*. The neighborhood he sang about was one where I and, I believed, others like me *belonged*.

I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you.
 I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.

As a child, perhaps I wished that my own neighbors, teachers, and classmates (and their parents) could feel that way about me and my mom. Instead, I seemed always to be on edge, waiting for the next racial hand grenade to be thrown. This experience lasted for more than a decade of my formative years and fundamentally shaped the way I look at and think about cities and neighborhoods.

So began my obsession. Throughout my young adulthood, I naively believed that one day we would see Dr. King's dream realized, that, as Rodney King pleaded, one day we would all "just get along." It was impressed upon me that relations between the races were much better than they ever had been: opportunities and access were expanding, and attitudes among whites were becoming more favorable. At the same time, my mother taught me early that, because we were black, we would "have to work twice as hard to get half as far." Implicit in her lesson was an acknowledgment that prejudice and discrimination were alive and kicking, despite any assertions to the contrary. My father is a white man and a junior college sociology instructor; he explained American race relations to me using conflict theories. I came to understand that the racial prejudice of whites is motivated not just by ignorance but also by concerns about maintaining an advantaged position. My family's presence in a neighborhood of all-white, owner-occupied households challenged our neighbors' ideas about how things "ought" to be. And the fact that I excelled academically and earned my place at the head of the class—ahead of white students—challenged their beliefs about black intellectual inferiority.

In spite of the prejudice we encountered, I grew up believing that someday, somehow, I would see the day when Mister Rogers' Neighborhood (the one I imagined at least) was a reality, not just for me, but for our country as a whole.

Let's make the most of this beautiful day.
 Since we're together we might as well say:
 Would you be mine?
 Could you be mine?
 Won't you be my neighbor?
 Won't you please,
 Won't you please?
 Please won't you be my neighbor?

Being a California girl, I looked at Los Angeles as a shining example of what was possible. We often visited the City of the Angels, only an hour away from home, to see extended family and friends. My paternal grandparents lived in the middle-class community of Burbank, and sometimes my mom and a friend of hers would pile us kids into the car on the spur of the moment to drive to South Central Los Angeles for a soul food dinner. Both of my parents took me to Los Angeles to experience its vast and diverse cultural opportunities—music, art, and theater. And of course, a little farther away was Disneyland. These experiences exposed me to people from all over the world, people of various hues, cultures, and religions, speaking many languages and eating all kinds of foods. Los Angeles was, quite simply, my promised land.

It wasn't until I moved to Los Angeles for graduate school that I began to realize just how segregated it is. Once again my dream was deferred, and once again I became obsessed with understanding why. It is a common misconception that a diverse city is logically an *integrated* city—particularly if “integrated” is taken to mean a high level of contact between and interaction with people from varying racial-ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. School desegregation is subject to the same misconception: students of different racial-ethnic backgrounds may be in the same building, but they are not necessarily mingling, or mingling in friendly ways.

Another common misconception in some circles is that racial residential segregation is no longer a central concern. Advocates of this view argue that with the end of legalized segregation and the passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, any remaining segregation is the result of either group differences in objective social class characteristics or the race-neutral preferences of residents to be around people like themselves. Thus, according to this argument, racial residential segregation persists because that is the way everyone wants it: actual residential patterns reflect our unconstrained choices. Some might even say that each of these factors is influential. It is hard to convince those who hold this view that another influential factor is persisting racial prejudice and discrimination. Our national tendency to believe that negative racial attitudes are no longer

problematic makes it painfully difficult to have any sort of national “conversation” about the salience of race in our country. Many Americans are willing to point to the end of legalized discrimination and the growing acceptance of “egalitarian principles” among whites as evidence that things are now okay; they argue that any remaining inequality is probably the result of “poor choices” or lack of impulse control among members of disadvantaged groups.

This volume represents my effort at understanding why and how race matters for the geographic distribution of racial-ethnic groups in cities. We now have ample evidence that where we live is consequential for our life chances: residential location influences experiences of long-term joblessness, out-of-wedlock births, school dropout, and exposure to crime and social disorder and is associated with lower average wages (Cutler and Glaeser 1997; Jargowsky 1996; Krivo and Peterson 1996; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987). Without sufficient resources, public services—particularly public schools—deteriorate in some residential areas as well. Racial residential segregation is deeply implicated in white-black differences in all these areas. This is so much the case that even after accounting for the social and economic disadvantages associated with residential segregation, David Cutler and Edward Glaeser (1997, 865) find that “a one-standard deviation reduction in segregation (13 percent) would eliminate one-third” of white-black differences in rates of school completion, single-parenthood, and employment, as well as earnings. It is also clear that economic inequality alone cannot account for the high degree of segregation in our cities—particularly that of blacks from whites.

Poor blacks are concentrated in neighborhoods characterized by extreme levels of disadvantage, and middle-class and affluent blacks are exposed to higher levels of neighborhood disadvantage than their status would seem to warrant (Alba, Logan, and Bellair 1994; Massey and Fischer 1999; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Wilson 1987). Suburban blacks are as segregated as their central-city counterparts; indeed, their suburban enclaves are part of a contiguous set of black neighborhoods that collectively make up the ghetto and are differentiated only by their status as the “best, mixed, [or] worst [area]” (Pattillo-McCoy 1999, 27; for similar assertions, see Galster 1991; Jargowsky and Bane 1991; Logan 2001a; Morenoff and Sampson 1997). The well-known perils associated with ghetto life and documented by quantitative researchers (Jargowsky 1996; Cutler and Glaeser 1997; Wilson 1987) and ethnographers (Anderson 1990, 1999; Edin and Kafalas 2004; Venkatesh 2000) are found, albeit to a lesser degree, in the neighborhoods of middle-class blacks (see, for example, Alba et al. 1994; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Timberlake 2002).

Racial inequality and tense intergroup relations seem to become more

likely and more pernicious as we become an increasingly diverse nation. Thus, it is vital that we confront not only the persisting segregation in our nation's neighborhoods but the primary importance of segregation for understanding patterns of economic inequality and the persistence of negative racial attitudes and relations. Moreover, it is long past time to expand all such analyses beyond black-white relations. We must look at the effect of the increase in racial-ethnic diversity not only on minority-group relations with whites but also on relations between minority groups. Does the introduction of new groups into the American "melting pot" change our racial hierarchy in any meaningful way? Specifically, do such changes in the racial hierarchy affect the position of blacks, or do they remain at the bottom? And what role does immigration play in understanding the increasing complexity of intergroup relations? Do immigrants' racial attitudes and perceptions of discrimination, for example, differ from those of their native-born counterparts? Does length of time in the United States or acculturation result in decreasing differences between the native- and foreign-born? How do beliefs about economic inequality or perceptions of racial group competition over scarce resources influence intergroup relations? How do all of these factors influence preferences for residential integration or segregation? And finally, to what extent do our preferences for neighborhood racial integration influence where we actually end up living?

Reducing racial residential segregation may be the most critical step toward eradicating economic inequality, a goal that would benefit all Americans, irrespective of race, class, or political stripe. Unfortunately, this is sometimes difficult for us to see. The findings reported in the following pages offer room for both optimism and concern. Mister Rogers didn't live long enough to see his neighborhood become a reality, and I may not either. Still, I hold out hope that my own daughters will grow to be as fond of Mister Rogers as I am—but for very different reasons.