

Black spaces, black places: Strategic assimilation and identity construction in middle-class suburbia

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Abstract

While white ethnics and immigrants of colour have been studied in terms of their attempts to assimilate into the American mainstream, sociologists assume that ongoing racial discrimination obviates the need for an extensive examination of the actual assimilation trajectories of middle-class blacks. Many middle-class blacks travel from the black to the white world rather than existing exclusively in one racially distinct environment. Yet, we do not fully understand how middle-class blacks conceptualize their own integration into American society. Drawing on data collected through in-depth interviews with middle-class blacks and ethnographic research in a white and a black suburb, I establish the link between an affinity for black spaces and the alternative assimilation trajectories of middle-class blacks. I find that middle-class blacks engage in a variant of segmented assimilation, privileging the black world as a site for socializing even if they live in a white suburb. This selective pattern of assimilation, what I term *strategic assimilation*, suggests that this population of middle-class blacks does not perceive itself as permanently constrained to the bottom rung of a racial hierarchy.

Keywords: Segmented; assimilation; black middle class; identity; race; suburbs; Jack and Jill.

Introduction

Native-born blacks have been portrayed historically as ‘unassimilable’, while white ethnic immigrants – and more recently, immigrants of colour – are studied in terms of their attempts to assimilate over generations (Myrdal 1944; Gans 1979; Lieberman 1980; Alba 1990; Waters 1990, 1999; McKee 1993; Portes and Zhou 1993; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997). Although researchers debate how best to

characterize the assimilation patterns of the latter groups, there is little disagreement about the status of native-born blacks. According to the prevailing view, blacks have undergone cultural assimilation or acculturation, but racism impedes their structural assimilation, that is, integration into mainstream 'social cliques, clubs and institutions...at the primary group level' (Gordon 1964, p. 80), leading some theorists to the conclusion that the assimilation model is most useful for understanding the incorporation of voluntary immigrants, not native-born blacks who entered the US involuntarily and were selectively incorporated through enslavement, coercion and dehumanizing Jim Crow laws (see Ogbu 1990; Alba 1995).¹ Simply put, the classic assimilation model assumes that a black racial identity is a liability in the US.

In contrast to the classic assimilation model, in which voluntary immigrants are said to naturally aspire to a single assimilation destination – the white, Anglo-Saxon mainstream – the theory of segmented assimilation advanced by Portes and Zhou (1993) posits that three paths of adaptation are possible for immigrants of colour. Ostensibly, one destination is the white middle class, but because immigrants of colour grapple with racial discrimination when they enter the US, they are more likely to either identify with the black underclass or carve out a third path by deliberately retaining the culture and values of their immigrant community (Portes and Zhou 1993). Along this third path, immigrants rely on their ethnic communities for social capital, employment leads, and relief from discrimination (Waters 1999). In short, segmented assimilation theory characterizes an ethnic identity as an invaluable resource.

In this article, I propose that a variant of the third path of segmented assimilation applies to middle-class black Americans. How middle-class blacks think about their integration into the American mainstream is a topic that has been relatively neglected in the sociological literature. Indeed, a central criticism of segmented assimilation theory is that it, too, characterizes a black racial identity as a liability. The theory presents poor blacks (and their downward mobility trajectory) as representative of all black Americans, discounting middle-class blacks as a potential path of adaptation for immigrants (Neckerman, *et al.* 1999). While Neckerman *et al.* (1999) outline an additional black middle-class path as a corrective, their primary purpose is to demonstrate that the black middle-class is a realistic destination for immigrants of colour, not to assess the effect of class position on the assimilation preferences of blacks.

I explore the relevance of an assimilation model for understanding the complexities of the black experience by examining middle-class blacks' concerns about nurturing black racial identities. Specifically, I

generate a theoretical framework to explain the processes by which middle-class blacks from two suburban communities negotiate the racial dualism that accompanies having to shift incessantly from the black to the white world. Like immigrants associated with the third path of segmented assimilation, many middle-class blacks with access to majority white colleges, workplaces, and neighbourhoods continue to consciously retain their connections to the black world as well; through their interactions in these black spaces, middle-class blacks construct and maintain black racial identities. I refer to this segmented form of incorporation as *strategic assimilation*.

To understand how strategic assimilation processes operate, I draw on data collected in 1997 and 1998 through in-depth interviews with thirty middle-class black couples and ethnographic study in two distinct middle-class suburban communities in the Washington, DC metropolitan area: Lakeview, a predominately white suburb and Riverton, a majority black suburb.² I focus specifically on the symbolic distinctions drawn by respondents, as a means of marking off the black world and as a strategy for negotiating the transition from the black to the white world. I conceptualize the type of identity construction that undergirds these distinctions as a form of *boundary-work*,³ a type of cultural work where individuals associate selected aspects of their identity with a specific cultural repertoire (Hannerz 1969; Lamont 1992; Lacy 2000; Lamont 2000) in order to maintain a consistent narrative of who they are in these suburban contexts (MacIntyre 1981; Taylor 1989; Johnson 1993). In doing so, I make three contributions to the race and ethnicity literature.

First, I demonstrate that theories used to explain the assimilation experiences of white ethnics and recent immigrants can be extended to a population of native-born blacks. Both Riverton and Lakeview blacks report that membership in a community of blacks is essential to the construction of black racial identity. Riverton blacks rely on their majority black subdivision – a geographical community – to suture a black racial identity, whereas Lakeview blacks use black social organizations – an ideological community – to accomplish this goal. In short, the middle-class blacks in this study engage in *strategic assimilation*, privileging the black world as a site for socializing even if they choose to live in a white suburban community.

Second, I show that middle-class blacks' decisions about how to negotiate the transition from the black to the white world vary by suburban context. Within mostly black Riverton, middle-class blacks are concerned with *buffering* their children from racism in preparation for their eventual entry into the white world. Within Lakeview, middle-class blacks are concerned with *preparing* their children to face racism by situating them in a predominantly white suburban community where they are compelled to interact frequently with whites. Thus, in

addition to the *internal* distinctions that arise among the groups of middle-class black suburbanites with respect to the appropriate way to traverse the black-white boundary, these blacks are also reproducing *external* distinctions that distinguish the black world from the white world.

Third, I consider whether the concept of racial hierarchy is still a useful way to understand the experiences of middle-class blacks. Analyses of middle-class blacks' halting integration into predominantly white residential communities are grounded in a long history of racial exclusion and federally sanctioned institutional discrimination, ranging from racial steering (Rieder 1985; Turner *et al.* 1991; Levine and Harmon 1992) to redlining (Jackson 1985; Yinger 1995) to racial animosity (Feagin and Sikes 1994). These practices help to sustain a racial hierarchy in which blacks, the least preferred neighbours, are deposited at the conceptual bottom (Zubrinisky and Bobo 1996), segregated from whites in most US cities notwithstanding their class status (Massey and Denton 1987, 1993; Zubrinisky-Charles 2001; Adelman, forthcoming 2004). But given the growing class diversification in black communities, moderate declines in black-white segregation in the southern and western regions of the US (Farley and Frey 1994), and the emergence of distinctly black, middle-class suburban enclaves in the south and midwest (Dent 1992), the notion that a black racial identity is necessarily synonymous with the lowest rung in a racial hierarchy may not be as tenable now as it was in previous years. Structural assimilation has not occurred for the mass of the black population, but it has occurred for some subsets of the black population.

In the current period, middle-class blacks may maintain their ties to the black world not only as a refuge from racial discrimination, but also because they enjoy interacting with other blacks. Scholars have given scant attention to the possibility that there is something enjoyable about being black and participating in a community of blacks. The primary focus of this article is to establish the relationship between perceived need and affinity for black spaces and the alternative assimilation trajectories of middle-class blacks. I begin by briefly introducing the boundaries literature with special attention to its utility for analysing assimilation processes. I then examine respondents' perceptions of discrimination. These racial attitudes bear on the identity construction processes outlined here. I go on to show how residential location affects access to different types of racial communities. In the conclusion, I consider whether this predilection for black spaces would diminish if racial hierarchy in the US were to be completely dismantled.

Theorizing boundary-work

Boundary work refers to the strategies group members employ, and the criteria that they draw upon, to construct a symbolic divide between their group and out-group members (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). These symbolic boundaries represent a complex structure of shared meanings which group members access in order to carry out social interactions (Douglas [1970]1996; Lacy 2002). Barth (1969) popularized boundary-work when he asserted that ethnic identity has less to do with an ethnic group's culture per se than with the process by which groups defend the boundary that defines their culture when they are confronted with outsiders. In the post-Civil Rights era, poor blacks remain isolated from whites and mainstream institutions, while middle-class blacks have increased access to these spaces (Wilson 1979, 1987). It makes sense to talk about identity negotiation among this specific subset of the black population, since middle-class blacks assume more responsibility for specifying how blacks will negotiate the black-white boundary than do lower-class blacks. This boundary-work constitutes the mechanism by which strategic assimilation processes operate.

Barth (1969) intends to show that ethnic identities are not fixed, invariant social categories, but that group members switch ethnic identities under conditions where their original identity is no longer useful. Barth allows for this flexibility among members of the same ethnic group.

The same group of people, with unchanged values and ideas, would surely pursue different patterns of life and institutionalize different forms of behaviour when faced with the different opportunities offered in different environments...[thus] we must expect to find that *one ethnic group*, spread over a territory with varying ecological circumstances, *will exhibit regional diversities of overt institutionalized behaviour which do not reflect differences in cultural orientation* (p. 12; emphasis added).

Barth's framework turns on an analysis of the two boundaries that shape racial identity construction: external and internal (see also Jenkins 1996). External boundary constructs represent society's interpretation of a racial group's identity and serve to distinguish one racial group from another. Internal boundary constructs reflect the group's self-portrayal and allow racial groups to make within-group distinctions. I bring the assimilation debate into sharper focus by linking the two constructs theoretically. By examining the internal distinctions that middle-class blacks draw among themselves with respect to the salience of black racial identities, I pinpoint differences

by suburban context in their understandings of how best to negotiate external boundaries, that is, to prepare their children to move back and forth between black and white worlds.

These differences in the nature and scope of boundary work among residents reflect a common cultural orientation among middle-class blacks governing their assimilation into the American mainstream: successful blacks should retain their membership in the black world. Assimilation theorists have given short shrift to the motives of middle-class blacks in light of their ambiguous position within the racial hierarchy (Horowitz 1975; Yinger 1981; Hirschmann 1983). But, in a society preoccupied with racial classification, upwardly mobile blacks may resist assimilating fully into the mainstream (Metzger 1971). These black middle-class suburbanites seek to participate in the political, educational, and economic mainstream but are reluctant to relinquish their ties to the black world where they maintain and nurture racial identity. Thus, race matters for blacks because society has decided that it does. But race also matters for blacks because they relish their associations with other blacks and their connections to black culture. It is this latter explanatory factor that assimilation theorists have largely overlooked.

Methods

The suburban sites

The data presented in this article were collected in 1997 and 1998 through in-depth interviews and participant observation in two middle class suburban communities. Using the 1990 US census and literature on suburbanization trends, I selected Washington, DC, a metropolitan area with significant rates of black suburbanization and a sizeable black middle class. Comparing the racial composition, educational attainment, median income, and median mortgage payments characterizing DC census tracts, I identified a majority white and a majority black suburb. A census tract I dub Riverton met my criteria for the black site. In 1990, Riverton was 65 per cent black, 21 per cent of residents were professionals, and 23 per cent were college graduates or above; median family income was \$66,144, and the median mortgage payment was \$1,212. A tract I dub Lakeview met my criteria for a majority white suburb. In 1990, Lakeview was 4 per cent black, 31 per cent of residents were professionals, 44 per cent were college graduates or above; median family income was \$78,907, and the median mortgage payment was \$1,242. The mean individual income for my sample is about \$72,000. I refer to respondents as 'middle class' rather than upper-middle-class because this is how they define themselves.

Riverton is a mostly black lower to upper-middle-class bedroom suburb. Prosperous blacks began to move there in the late 1970s, settling in subdivisions abandoned by whites. Over time, as older housing changed hands and inexpensive newly constructed housing was constructed, lower middle-class blacks began to move in. As a result, living in Riverton means that residents come into close contact with a broad range of middle-class blacks. Blacks began to move into Lakeview, directly across the river from Riverton, in the late 1960s and 70s, but in much smaller numbers. Lakeview subdivisions are established, older communities and middle-class blacks are a marginal presence there. Consequently, blacks in Lakeview are less likely to encounter and interact with other blacks from their neighbourhood.

Data collection and analysis

After making initial contacts, I then used snowball sampling techniques to select additional respondents. To minimize sampling bias, I also identified potential respondents at subdivision outings and meetings. Engaging in participant observation also allowed me to speak about the quality of the neighbourhood and relationships between residents.

I conducted in-depth, individual interviews with respondents in their homes using a loosely structured interview schedule. Questions covered: housing decisions, neighbourhood satisfaction, racial socialization, class consciousness, consumption patterns, parenting, and perceptions of discrimination. The interviews ranged from 2 to 3 hours. This process produced fifty-four transcribed interviews (six spouses were either unavailable or were unwilling to sit for an interview). The data were analysed using the methods of coding and comparison outlined by proponents of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

The desirability of racial integration

To properly understand the assimilation preferences of these middle-class blacks and the significance of black racial identities, I examine their perceptions of discrimination. Such perceptions reflect the broad racial backdrop against which identity construction processes are carried out. Studies designed to assess various indicators of racial progress lead to vastly different understandings of the persistence of racial hierarchy in the US. One set paints a bleak picture (Benjamin 1991; Bell 1992; Hacker 1992; Cose 1993), drawing our attention to ongoing disparities between blacks and whites, in wealth (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Conley 1999), in access to housing (Massey and Denton 1993), and in the public sphere (Feagin 1991; Feagin and Sikes 1994).

However, a more optimistic portrait, painted by a different group of social scientists, points to indicators such as improved black educational attainment (Patterson 1997) and a narrowing of the black-white wage gap (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997) as measures of racial hierarchy deconstruction.

Widespread disagreement among scholars as to the nature and character of racial progress in the US underscores the need for greater attention to middle-class blacks' understanding of their integration into American society. Attitudinal studies have made considerable gains in this regard. As Bobo makes clear, 'race relations involve more than just external and material ingredients like housing patterns, incomes, or educational attainments...[t]here are also cultural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal aspects that affect the subjective experience of...Americans' (Schuman, Steeh and Bobo, 1985 p.12). These researchers report the majority of blacks believe that racial discrimination has not diminished, but increased, and that the pace of racial progress is painfully slow (Gwaltney 1980; Blauner 1989; Sigelman and Welch 1991; Hochschild 1995). Moreover, this grim assessment is fairly pervasive among middle-class blacks. Wealthier blacks report more discrimination than poor blacks, are less optimistic about racial progress, and are less inclined to believe that whites positively type blacks (Feagin 1991; Hochschild 1995, Sigelman and Tuch 1997; Young 1999).

To be sure, middle-class blacks' willingness to assimilate into the American mainstream is tempered by their belief that racial discrimination has not waned (Sigelman and Welch 1991). How does this sentiment expressed among national samples of middle-class blacks resonate with Riverton and Lakeview blacks? Both populations of blacks realize that the primary locus of interaction for their children will be the white world where they will work, shop, and, possibly, live. Thus, both groups are concerned with preparing their children to function in predominantly white settings.⁴ Indeed both groups report support (sometimes lukewarm) for indicators of assimilation such as having their children marry interracially or join a white fraternity or sorority. However, this general support is undercut by their awareness of ongoing racial discrimination. Often relying on their own experiences as a gauge, respondents fear that their children will endure unnecessary hardship in these kinds of intimate interactions with whites. This perspective is typified by Philip, a Riverton resident, who explained how he would react if his young daughters were to marry a white man when they grew up.

I'd talk to them about how interracial couples fare in this society, some of the drawbacks about being married to a white person, how you're not going to be able to relate to that family like you'd like to.

Going to family functions is going to be real tough... when you meet rednecks in your [husband's] family. And regardless of what their economic status is, you're still going to have that. And again, once all these things are made clear to them, if they still want to do it... after I've painted that picture for them, then hey, it's on them.

Isabelle, a Lakeview resident, expressed similar concerns – and resignation. 'I would not rule out that all three of [her children] at some point in their lives will date someone white', she lamented, 'And I'm not gonna sit here and lie and say that that thrills me, because it doesn't'.

Riverton and Lakeview blacks also are resistant to their children joining a white fraternity or sorority, although just as they would not intervene to prevent their child marrying a person of another race, they also would not preclude their children, once adult, from seeking membership in a white organization. Their concerns range from their own negative experience with fraternities to the ulterior motives of whites to the importance of black social spaces. Gregg, a Riverton resident, explains that his 'past experience' with a fraternity would give him pause.

I went to my majority white school and I was being pledged in a certain fraternity... Went through all the hell week and the whole nine yards. I find out they were about to lose their charter because they didn't want to accept any black kids... Whoever the founding fathers were, they said "no, we can't have any black folks in this fraternity." I'd have been the first... so I was joining *until* my pledge brothers... were putting on this event the day that Martin Luther King got shot. I had to be down at the fraternity house... One of the guys walked in and said, "Oh, they shot that nigger". I... leaped up and hit him upside the head. [Karyn: Did you know... he was talking about... King?] Well, no, I just heard the word "nigger", and that just set me off... and I was fighting everybody. So they pulled me off and then later they said, "Aw, Gregg, he didn't mean it". So [after that] I didn't want to join their fraternity, so I didn't.

Gregg realized that one reason the members were interested in him was that they needed black members to maintain their charter. William, a Lakeview resident, questioned the motives of fraternity members as well.

I would tell'em to... find out the real reason why they want them to join... One of my friends... is from Hollins College... and when he was growing up, the only black people there was custodians. Now they recruiting blacks. But when you look at the reason *why* they

recruiting blacks, is it because they want 'em there, or is it because of the aid they get from the federal government?...“is there a quota that you must have to survive?” Because if you know what you're dealing with, you can deal with it. But if it's under the table, then later you find out the real reason, it might do more harm to you mentally than if they'd just laid it out on the table.

Visibly upset by the possibility that one of his sons might join a white fraternity, Richard, a Lakeview resident and member of a black fraternity bristled, “I would probably throw up. I don't know if I would be supportive of it. But, in the final analysis, if that's what they wanted to do, I would not block it...I just don't think that's fair.”

Though generally opposed to white fraternities and sororities, few respondents objected to their children attending a white college. Most attended white colleges themselves. Laughing, Terry, a Riverton resident who attended a white college, exclaimed, ‘I went to one! What's the difference?’. Michael joked that his child could go to a white college ‘if he got the money!’ [he laughs]. Then turning serious, Michael favours attending a white college because these institutions provide access to influential social networks.

My wife went to [a white college], she says she missed some of the black experience...I went to [a black college], I probably had too much of the black experience!...I don't see it negative, I think they're equal. You go to an all-white school, you're rubbin'...elbows with some of the next day's leaders...not that black people can't be leaders, but, [my wife] was telling me...she was talking to people who had maids and servants, and stuff. Now, I didn't know anybody like that.

Richard believes attending a black college is a good thing to do before going on to a white graduate school.

I think at an undergraduate level, it's good to experience that black college university environment. I think it's nothing like it. Best four years of my life. Now when you think about going to graduate school, then I think that might be the time to get to the best school. I kind of took that path myself. I went to graduate school at [a white university]. And undergraduate, I went to [a black college].

And Michelle insisted that she would compel her children to attend a white college because that is the ‘real’ world. ‘I expect my kids to go to white colleges. Because you need to know what real life is like. I don't think black colleges give you that experience. I went to a predominantly white college’. When her ten-year old daughter who is

sitting in on the interview asks, 'Are you saying that if I wanted to go to Spelman you wouldn't let me?' Michelle responded, 'Not gonna happen'.

Riverton and Lakeview blacks share a 'cultural orientation' with respect to the degree of social integration they desire with whites (Barth 1969). Both groups report that a current of racial discrimination undergirds blacks' interactions with whites. Consequently, respondents are 'not thrilled' about the possibility of their children engaging in interracial marriages. They want their children to marry blacks and to socialize with blacks. Using these measures of social integration, residents draw sharp boundaries around the black world. Yet, respondents are open to their children attending white colleges. Both groups perceive this form of integration as an important step on the path to economic success. Moreover, attendance at a white college or university may facilitate blacks' ability to move back and forth from the black to the white world in adulthood.

Next, I identify the boundaries that respondents erect in preparation to travel back and forth across the black-white boundary. Riverton and Lakeview blacks differ on how best to prepare for interactions in the white world. I attribute this difference to the patterns of race relations that residents encounter in their respective suburban communities (Barth 1969).

Growing up around blacks: The desire for racially-distinct spaces

Marked changes in the modern period such as growth in the percentage of the black population that is middle class and the introduction of Civil Rights legislation in 1964 and 1965 have led to a shift in the social meaning of black spaces. During segregation, middle-class blacks were compelled to develop strategies to ease the pain of their marginalization, such as rejecting the segregated sections of public spaces that had been designated for black use. In the process, middle-class blacks turned private, black spaces into places of refuge. According to Landry (1987), under segregation,

While blacks of all classes kept to themselves... middle-class blacks especially were diligent in avoiding situations that reminded them of the dilemma of their status...they eschewed...the segregated balconies of white theaters and the substandard black theaters, preferring parties...at home...Behind closed doors, middle-class blacks could act as though the outside world that rejected them did not exist or at least could feel a little sheltered from it (p. 79).

Before desegregation, middle-class blacks maintained their own exclusive, black spaces because they had been denied full access to

white institutions. While the *legal* barriers to most white spaces have now been dismantled, many *informal* barriers remain. Under these conditions of marginality, a middle-class black affinity for black spaces is still essential – to black identity formation. Charlotte, a Lakeview resident, summed up nicely the modern dilemma of identity negotiation: ‘we live in this world, and it’s kind of like being black, you know you have two faces. So you know how to present yourself in the white world, and you present yourself in the black world as yourself’. This contemporary enactment of DuBois’ ([1903], 1961) *double consciousness* construct reinforces the idea that black identity is bound by external *and* internal determinants.⁵ Theorists who insist that black identity is entirely externally derived inappropriately give more weight to the way in which blacks are perceived by others than to how blacks perceive each other (on this point, see Alexander 1996). In this section, I demonstrate the importance of black spaces as crucial ‘construction sites’ (Cornell and Hartmann 1998) for the formation of black racial identity. I begin with Riverton, a geographically black space.

Riverton

Michael, a corporate manager and 10-year resident of Riverton, reveals, I can tell black people that didn’t grow up around other black people, ‘cause they act different. . . . I haven’t been able to put my finger on it. It’s either the expression, the way they give five, I mean it’s just *something*. They missed something. Well, I shouldn’t say *missing*, but they are *lacking* something. And that’s not positive or negative, they just don’t have an ingredient. Not that they aren’t black, but. . . they’re just missing something.

Ironically, the view that blacks who did ‘grow up around other black people’ hold a more salient racial identity than those who did not is shared by blacks from both Riverton and Lakeview. Both groups of blacks believe that racial identity is sutured primarily through social interaction in the black world, and that blacks who miss this experience fail to interpret correctly the cultural cues group members use to draw boundaries around the black world; these blacks are reduced to the status of ‘outsiders’ (Merton 1972). The key distinction is that respondents disagree about what growing up around other black people means. Riverton blacks mean that their *neighbourhood* serves as the ‘construction site’ (Cornell and Hartmann 1998) for black identity. Their children develop an insider’s sense of what it means to be black as they learn cultural cues through interaction with black neighbours. Because they are immersed in a mostly black environment, Riverton residents tend not to discuss racial identity

outright with their children, under the assumption, as Greg explains, that 'they learn on their own'.

My daughter had..gone for her first day of school [she]..came home and asked, "Are we black?" [He replied], "What do you mean?" She says, "Well, we don't *talk* black." [he said], "What do you mean?" "Well, we don't say '*honey chile*'" [drags this out in a southern accent]. And I said, "Well, you know, we just don't talk that way"...it was the first time that she had been to a majority black school...it *was* a culture shock.

Greg, a government official and his family came back to the US after living in Taiwan for three years. At the time of their arrival, his children were outsiders, unfamiliar with the boundaries Riverton blacks erect to establish the parameters of blackness. This dilemma was resolved by the family's permanent residence in Riverton. 'Basically, we encourage our children to be black...just by living here, the experience' Greg explained. 'We're in a black neighbourhood, so...all her friends will be black, and she can live that black experience [for] herself'.

In classic sociological studies (DuBois [1899], 1973; Drake and Cayton [1945], 1993; Frazier 1957) and in more recent memoirs penned by middle-class blacks, the black community is portrayed as a refuge from the demands of the white world (Cary 1991; Nelson 1993; McCall 1994; Fulwood 1996), a place where 'there is a comfort—and a sanctity—that makes it almost possible to forget that there is a white power structure touching [black] lives at all' (Graham 1999, pp. 152–3). In such an environment, blacks hold their racial identity in abeyance, as something that you *are*, rather than what you *do*. Michael admitted that he too allows his children to develop their racial identity through their experiences in the neighbourhood with other blacks. In the black world, blacks can just be 'who they are', because the social construction of their racial identity is an osmotic process.

It's really hard sometimes for them to get a conscious understanding of what black is...It's not so much, "we doing this, we doing that," but they know that [their neighbour] is a judge, and they can see the different types of interactions and the people that come to the house. So...I feel that they will just grow up being who they are...it's not so much they're wearing blackness on their chest...walking around talkin' 'bout 'I'm black and I'm proud',...if we lived in an all-white neighbourhood, we'd probably have to do that, you know. But we don't because they just see it.

Riverton blacks ontologize the black experience (Anderson 1995), constructing blackness as just 'being who [you] are'. But, this standpoint differs from the essentialist platform used by gender theorists to describe the motivation for gender-based social movements such as feminism (Fuss 1989). Rather than arguing that the essence of blackness is the socially constructed biological component, Riverton blacks argue that race is a given when they are ensconced in their heavily black suburb and that it can therefore be set aside. What remains is the identity they or their children choose to put forth in neighbourhood interactions. John complained,

You know, I hear people talking about, "that little girl don't know she's black". To me, that's the most ridiculous thing you could ever say! How am I, I mean, should I teach [his daughter] about being a woman? Should I teach her about being an earthling? No. I don't see any point in that. Now, I know a lot of people would criticize me for that. She is going to be black. There is nothing that I can teach her that's going to prevent her from being black. Or help her to be black.

Riverton blacks find that blackness is actualized as they socialize in a black environment. During their immersion in a black community, Riverton children prepare for their transition into the white world. 'I want my children to be able to leave my house strong enough to make it in the [real] world', Lydia, a Riverton resident, told me. Lydia and her husband's residence in a predominately black suburb is a significant part of their childrens' training.

To 'make it' in the real world, Riverton blacks realize that their children need to be prepared to travel back and forth from the black to the white world. Yet, the term 'black world' does not refer solely to a *spatial* community of black residents (Wellman 1999). The black world is also an 'interpretive community' (Gilroy 1993) with boundaries defined by a cultural repertoire that middle-class blacks rely on to define the black experience. It is this interpretive community that black middle-class residents of Lakeview access in the construction of a racial identity.⁶

Lakeview

At first glance, it would appear that Lakeview blacks have sacrificed their ties to the black community in order to take up residence in a white suburb, but this view is inaccurate. 'When I moved here, it wasn't one of those things that I tried to move away from blacks'. William, a social worker and 5-year Lakeview resident informed me. 'It was one of those things where I tried to move to a place where the kids could get the best of what the county had to offer'. In other words, William

chose the suburb where he believed his children would have access to the greatest amount of resources. Since they live in a highly mobile society, Lakeview blacks reason that they need not live near blacks in order to socialize with them. 'I wasn't as concerned about how many blacks were gonna be living out there [in Lakeview]'. Alana, a corporate attorney and Lakeview resident for twenty-two years explained, 'because I used to say that would be my job, to supplement my kids with exposure to other blacks. So that was not a factor, and is still not, because there are a lot of other ways that they can interact with blacks'.

What does concern middle-class blacks in Lakeview is the same thing that troubled Riverton blacks. Blacks in both suburbs struggle with how to prepare their kids for the 'real world'. Riverton blacks focus on how they see themselves in relation to their (majority) black neighbours. Lakeview blacks, whose children spend more time negotiating interactions with whites, stress identification by others, whites in particular. Charlotte, whose son married a white woman and intends to raise his bi-racial daughter to believe that she is 'human', insisted that

it's not important how *you* define yourself, it's how *other people* define you. Because if I told my child that they were white, or half-black, and they went to school thinking that, and then when they got in school, the kid called them a "nigga", then they're gonna say, "well, I don't understand, I'm not really that, I'm this". You have to prepare your children for the world.

Charlotte's comment reveals that Lakeview residents admonish their children to identify with their black identity in part because they believe their children will eventually confront racial discrimination. Alana's daughter attends a competitive exam school, where blacks constitute about 5 per cent of the student population. As a result, many of her daughter's friends are white students from school. Alana occasionally says to her daughter, 'I say it just like this: "remember, you are black"'. 'Do you think', I ask, 'that she's forgotten?' Alana responds, 'No,' then,

sometimes, to be truthful, yes. And I'll just say, "remember". We haven't had any incidents, but I just want her to realize that there could come a time, so that when and if it does happen, she is not devastated by it...sometimes *kids* can be fair, but when they get home, [the parents exclaim] "What?! You invited *who* over here?!" ...she hasn't shared where she knows that everybody in this little circle of friends were invited someplace and she wasn't. But, you gotta be honest, everybody doesn't treat everybody the same, and I

don't want her to say, "what?!". And that's just my way of telling her, "remember, you black", and there could potentially be a time when that will determine something.

Despite the greater potential for racist encounters, Lakeview residents believe growing up living in the 'real world' is the best preparation for negotiating the boundary between the black and the white world as an adult. Alana expressed concern for black children who grow up in a predominantly black environment, and black adults who never master traversing the boundary.

Some kids have a difficult time because they are not as comfortable in all types of settings. And they have to get used to that, because that's the *real* world. When you go on a job, if you go to Harvard, clearly you are not going to be in the majority, and a lot of kids, not even just kids, a lot of *people* can't deal with it. They've got to be around their own element.

But when they are not at work or at school, Lakeview blacks socialize in the black world. They maintain contact with this segment of their lives by participating in black religious and social organizations. Lakeview residents are more likely than Riverton residents to attend a black church, hold membership in a black sorority, fraternity, or social group, or to participate in the exclusive, black social organization *Jack and Jill*.

Founded by a group of upper middle-class mothers in 1938, *Jack and Jill*'s mission was to provide middle-class black children with the educational, cultural, and social experiences traditionally reserved for middle-class white children. Membership in *Jack and Jill* is by invitation only (unless your mother held a membership), although this screening process is far less restrictive now than it was at the organization's founding. Early on, the organization acquired a reputation for snobbery. 'Some people don't like it [now]', Charlotte admitted, 'because they say in the beginning it just had a lot of, you know how you had the black people who are lighter skinned, they were like the doctors and lawyers. It was an exclusive group. . . But then, like a lot of groups, it changed' [see Keith and Herring (1991) for a detailed discussion of the effect of skin tone on blacks' social mobility patterns]. Still, some chapters of the national organization are more difficult to get into than others. According to Charlotte, 'Some of the chapters are real sticky. They only have a certain number to come in each year. This woman told me, she's from Jamaica, she said [she assumes a Jamaican accent] "*getting*' into *Jack and Jill*. . . *is like gettin' into heaven*" [she dissolves into peals of laughter] I was rollin'! But our chapter is real down to earth'.

Most mothers do not join *Jack and Jill* in order to make friends themselves. The invitation to join is premised on the fact that the mother seeking membership has already established friendships with the other mothers. Lakeview mothers join *Jack and Jill* so that their children will meet certain other black children. When Alana's children began elementary school, 'there still was a real small number of African Americans [enrolled there]. And that's where I felt that *Jack and Jill* became important', she said, 'because this was a way that they could have African American friends, see that there are other people who are like them, who have interests like them'.

Jack and Jill began as an organization for black children to be exposed to activities in the white world. Now, the majority of *Jack and Jill's* membership base is black suburban mothers and their children, who live in predominantly white communities, isolated from other blacks. One of those mothers, Jasmine, concluded, 'Now *Jack and Jill* is more for people in suburbia, like we are, when there are not enough African American kids, and [that way] your kids have someone to bond with'.

Jack and Jill is a construction site in Lakeview just as the suburb itself is a construction site in Riverton. In both suburbs, blacks hope to prepare their children to live successfully in the white world while retaining their connections to the black world. Riverton blacks find that their children figure out how to be black on their own, through their interactions in their majority black community. Lakeview blacks find that developing a strong racial identity in a white environment requires intervention; it has to be reinforced through participation in black social organizations – the interpretive community. Traditionally, middle-class blacks have used social clubs and organizations to 'express and reinforce the middle-class ideals of restrained public deportment and 'respectability' (Drake and Cayton [1945] 1993, p. 689). These social organizations were an integral part of life in the segregated black community. Now, unlike their counterparts in mostly white Lakeview, the few Riverton blacks who participate in *Jack and Jill* characterize membership in the social organization as just one social activity among a host of others. *Jack and Jill* may reinforce values important to the family, but, as John, a Riverton resident explained, 'that's not why [his daughter]'s in 'em. She's in 'em 'cause it's something fun for her to do, meet kids and learn stuff... I don't see her whole life as organizing it around teaching values or reinforcing blackness'.

Blacks in Riverton and Lakeview seek a construction site where black identity is nurtured, a community where they can socialize and reconnect with other blacks after spending the bulk of their day in the white world. The key difference in Riverton and Lakeview blacks' affinity for black spaces is their access to these settings. Riverton

parents are immersed in a black residential community, and can therefore assume that their children will have ample opportunities to interact with other blacks. Lakeview blacks live in a suburban community where blacks are rare. They have to take additional steps to expose their children to black spaces. Note, the socialization concerns of Riverton and Lakeview blacks differ considerably from those of poor and lower middle-class black parents in predominantly black neighbourhoods (see Anderson 1999; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). This preference for socializing in the black world and academic achievement in the white constitutes a pattern of strategic assimilation, in which middle-class blacks make the transition back and forth from the black to the white world, prioritizing black culture and social ties in the black world so as to reconnect with other blacks and to benefit from the resources and social networks exclusive to their group.

Conclusion

Derrick Bell argued persuasively in an elegant analysis of modern-day racism that '[b]lack people are the magical faces at the bottom of society's well' (Bell 1992). Before the passage of Civil Rights legislation, when the realities of segregation stymied the economic capacities of blacks, resigned them to inferior elementary and secondary schools, stripped blacks of adequate political representation, and restricted them to black neighbourhoods, this claim rang true unequivocally. In the post-Civil Rights era, considerable growth in the proportion of the black population that is middle-class renders the collective positioning of all blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy implausible today. This does not mean that middle-class blacks are impervious to racial discrimination. It does point to the need to identify the conditions under which middle-class blacks consider being black a liability or an advantage as they move from their suburban communities to the 'real world' of white colleges and workplaces. In much of the existing literature, sociologists mistakenly assume that persistent racial discrimination obviates the need for extensive consideration of the actual assimilation trajectories and strategies of middle-class blacks.

I have shown that middle-class blacks who have access to white neighbourhoods and predominantly white work spaces demonstrate concerns about maintaining black social ties and culture that can be likened to the third path of segmented assimilation theory. Among immigrants of colour, ethnic enclaves constitute an immediate social network, shelter immigrants from discrimination, and provide resources expressly for the group's members. Among native-born blacks, black spaces and places provide a place to reconnect with other blacks after spending the bulk of the day in the white world, isolate middle-

class blacks from ongoing discrimination, and constitute an important site for the construction of black racial identities. Black *spatial* contexts are key sites for Riverton residents. Since they live in a mostly black community, their children learn how to be black through their interactions with their black neighbours. Black *organizational* contexts are key sites for Lakeview residents. They live in communities where they are often the only black family, or one of a few, therefore their children learn how to be black through their interactions with other blacks in social organizations. These findings suggest that both groups of blacks find pleasure in being black and seek out other blacks, in part, because they value their participation in a community of blacks.

Riverton and Lakeview blacks routinely travel from the black to the white world rather than existing exclusively in either a primarily white or black environment. Capturing this phenomenon requires a new theoretical framework. I have proposed *strategic assimilation* as a useful framework for understanding this process. One might argue that these black spaces, and the racial identities that are nurtured there, remain meaningful precisely because they are constructed against a formidable backdrop: the racialized social structure in American society, which takes little or no notice of middle-class blacks. While strategic assimilation may characterize the current experiences of these middle-class blacks, it is possible that in the absence of racial discrimination and labelling, their affinity for black spaces would wane. The work of symbolic ethnicity theorists suggests that groups are motivated to carve out ethnic distinctions, even under conditions where these identities have no real consequence in their everyday lives. It remains to be seen whether this pattern will hold true for native-born blacks.

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Notes

1. For an extended discussion of Jim Crow laws, see C. Vann Woodward (1974).
2. Names of respondents and suburban sites have been changed to maintain anonymity.
3. Barth (1969) does not use the term 'boundary work', but he laid the groundwork for this kind of analysis by arguing that social groups understand who they are only by drawing symbolic distinctions between themselves and out-groups. The term was coined by Gieryn (1983) in a study designed to explain how scientists distinguish 'scientific' research from non-scientific intellectual activities. Consistent with Bryson (1996), Lamont (1992, 2000), and Peterson and Simkus (1992), I use the concept to refer to the symbolic distinctions social groups draw against others to construct their identity.
4. See France Winddance Twine's chapter in this volume for a discussion of the strategies employed by white British mothers to teach their bi-racial children how to recognize and respond to racism. The mothers discourage their children from embracing a bi-racial identity. They encourage a black racial identity instead under the assumption that a biracial identity is a distraction in racist encounters. Twine refers to this transaction as 'racial literacy'.
5. DuBois intended the term 'double consciousness' to reflect the tension he believed black Americans experience as they negotiate two "unreconciled" identities: their status as Americans and their status as blacks. The structure of race relations in American society, he argued, created in blacks a unique "second-sight. . .this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (DuBois [1903]1961, pp. 16–17).
6. Gilroy's (1993) 'interpretive community' parallels Anderson's (1991) notion of an 'imagined community' in which members feel a strong connection to one another on the basis of nationality despite the fact that they may never actually speak to or have contact with most members of their community. Race and ethnicity theorists have appropriated Anderson's concept in order to examine membership loyalties in racial communities.

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