

ONE The Class of 1980

On a hot July afternoon, Larry Rubin was sitting on the large wooden deck behind his spacious, newly built suburban home in northern New Jersey.¹ Drinking cool water and wearing a T-shirt from the prominent university he had attended two decades before, Larry watched three of his four sons playing on their backyard jungle gym—a well-equipped structure that rivaled those of many public playgrounds. Their squeals echoed off the tall trees that provided privacy from the nearest neighbors almost an acre away. His wife, Laura, carrying their infant son in a baby sling, pushed one of the older boys on a swing. The Rubins had just returned from a beach vacation, and Larry was enjoying an extra day off before returning to work in a family-owned business.

Life was good for Larry and his family. Like so many white, upper-middle-class families, they had benefited from the shifts in the American economy since the early 1980s—twenty-five years in which those in the highest income bracket, the “fortunate fifth,” made more money and acquired wealth much faster than everyone else.² They had a home that would fit comfortably in the pages of *House Beautiful*, a well-equipped minivan, and the American Dream of a large plot of land in a safe and secure suburb, far removed from the most vexing social problems of large cities and poorer communities.

Yet something was nagging Larry, who remembered his own childhood of the 1960s and 1970s as being both less and more than that of his sons. Larry grew up in Englewood, New Jersey—a racially and

socioeconomically diverse town not too far from his current home—where he had far fewer amenities than his own children because his parents were not as well off financially as he is today. His mother was a nurse and his father a professor at a small college. During high school, Larry recalled working in restaurants over the summer while his more affluent classmates went on teen tours or to sleep-away camp.

But in another way, Larry realized, he had opportunities that his sons are missing out on—the public schools he attended in Englewood taught him unique lessons about life that he greatly values to this day. From the moment he entered kindergarten in 1967 to his high school graduation in 1980, Larry went to school with students from both sides of the railroad tracks that literally divide Englewood by race and class. In ninth grade he and his classmates were joined by more well-to-do white students who came down the hill from a nearby K-8 school system in Englewood Cliffs to attend Englewood's Dwight Morrow High School. By the late 1970s, Dwight Morrow High was 57 percent black, 36 percent white, and 7 percent Hispanic. The white students ranged from very affluent to lower middle class in terms of their family backgrounds, while the black and Hispanic students ranged from middle class to poor. A large percentage—some say more than half—of the white students were Jewish, creating a dynamic mix of race, class, and religion in one school that Larry and his former classmates all say they have not experienced since. Larry, a white middle-class Jewish boy and a member of the mostly black football and track teams, found himself at the center of this mix, and he loved it.

"I was proud of a place that was diverse in population," Larry said. "For the most part, I felt like we all got along, it was definitely . . . there was a mix socially. I think I had a lot to do with [that]—not that I caused it, but I was in the middle of a lot of social mixing happening, and I think helped make it safe for people to get together . . . and I loved being a white guy who could walk in those worlds."

His sons, on the other hand, are growing up in a more "lily white" environment and—while there are a handful of Asian and Indian families in the town—have hardly any exposure to African Americans or Hispanics. In that way, he said, his sons lack the kind of daily experiences that gave him a deeper appreciation of people on the other side of

the color line. Through their synagogue he and his older children are involved in community service, helping in homeless shelters and Red Cross centers in Englewood. But Larry worries that these interactions teach very different lessons from the ones he learned. The mostly black clientele in those settings are extremely poor and down and out—people who need help for a whole host of reasons; they will not be his sons' interracial friends and teammates.

Indeed, the more affluent and racially homogeneous community in which Larry and his family now live is “very much in a different world” from Englewood and Dwight Morrow—even if it is only miles away. Larry rarely sees or talks to his black friends from high school; he said their paths rarely cross. Since he went to college three months after high school graduation, most of his friends and the people he interacts with regularly are white and upper middle class. While he has seen a handful of his former black friends from Dwight Morrow—at a high school reunion and occasionally on the streets of Englewood where his parents still live—he commented on the separate and unequal “paths” he and these friends took after high school. “I have such warm feelings and memories of being with all these people, and we didn't save any of it. . . . I'm not friends with them now. . . . I think I went off with my white world. . . . People live lives for the most part along color,” he said.

As Larry's life—and many of his classmates' lives—became far more racially segregated after high school, so did Dwight Morrow High School. Fewer white students enrolled each year, until, by the 1990s, there were virtually none. The school's once prominent reputation and its track record for sending students on to Ivy League colleges had evaporated, along with its political support among the more privileged members of the town and the local community's commitment to keeping it one of the top-ranked public high schools in the state.

Thus, while Larry now resides near his old high school—he noted he could jog there and back for exercise—he never considered moving back into the town of Englewood and sending his children to school there. Speaking of his old high school, Larry said, “It is what it is. It's just the reality. I mean, it's sad to me [because Dwight Morrow] had a soul, it had

a feeling; it wasn't just this building. And I think it was just as important, just as rich an experience for black students as it was for the white students, as it was for me."

The racial segregation that envelops his adult life and defines it in stark contrast to his life as a child and teenager bothers Larry because it symbolizes the limits of this country's so-called social experiment known as school desegregation. He argued that much more could have been done to make the society as a whole more racially integrated and equal at the time—in the 1970s—when the public schools were struggling with these issues pretty much on their own. He said that when he and his classmates were in high school they had created a foundation for integration that, while it was not perfect, was a beginning—a base that could have been built upon to push for integration in other realms of society. "There were things going on where we could have taken this . . . being in an integrated environment—and maybe done more."

Absent such social and political efforts to build on what the children of school desegregation began, Larry said, "We went to school with each other. . . . We got along nice, we all threw our hats up together, and then we don't talk or see each other anymore. . . . We didn't make the world an integrated place. It's just not."

Like many in his forty-something generation, Larry vacillates between his guilt over the individual pathways he and many of classmates took and his anger at the larger society and its political leaders who, especially in the past twenty-five years, have neither supported nor sustained racially mixed institutions. The relatively brief period of history—from the late 1960s to the early 1980s—when school desegregation was implemented in hundreds of school districts across the country was not enough. According to Larry:

I find it's so complicated for me, because I lived this certain life, and I don't live that life now. But I feel that . . . anybody who is different than me is equal to me as a person, before whoever, before God or before—we're just equal. But I don't live an equal life. . . . I'm trying to live the good life, but I want other people to live a good life too. And I know . . . I feel those things because I went to Dwight Morrow, I have this background. And if someone didn't, you know,

they don't think about these things—I'm very mixed on what did this background do to me.

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As this book illustrates, Larry is not alone in his confusion about what attending a racially mixed school did to him. We spent five years talking to people like Larry—Americans in six diverse towns who graduated from desegregated high schools more than twenty-five years ago. We emerged from our cross-country travels with a profound understanding of the untold story of school desegregation in the United States. We found that despite pundits' claims that school desegregation is a failed social experiment, the millions of people who lived through this anomalous chapter of American history in the 1970s have a far more complicated tale to tell. Yet when we began this research no one had asked them whether *they* thought school desegregation was a success, a failure, or a bit of both.

Through thousands of hours of interviews with the graduates of school desegregation—as well as the educators who taught them and the community leaders who fashioned the policies that brought them together—we learned that this grand American “experiment” of enrolling children of different racial backgrounds in the same schools was simultaneously hopeful and dispiriting. In other words, much like the contradictory meanings of race that most Americans carry around in their heads, the stories of these graduates are double-sided, reflecting both how far we have come as a nation since the days of Jim Crow and how little progress we have made in moving toward an equal and integrated society.

Their stories are *hopeful* because virtually all of the graduates we interviewed said that attending desegregated public schools dispelled their fears of people of other races, taught them to embrace racial and cultural differences, and showed them the humanness of individuals across racial lines. In comparing themselves to peers and spouses who did not have similar integrative experiences, they are quick to note how much more comfortable they feel in multiracial settings or in places where they are a minority. They told us that while their years attending racially and

ethnically diverse public schools were not always easy or tension-free, they were highly valuable preparation for an increasingly complex and global society.

At the same time, many of the graduates, especially blacks and Latinos, found their desegregated schooling experience *dispiriting* because it too often underscored how separate and unequal their lives were outside school. For instance, the racially segregated neighborhoods they lived in created logistical barriers to desegregation, namely long distances to travel to racially mixed schools. Usually, but not always, this logistical burden was placed primarily on black students, who often traveled great distances to attend racially diverse schools in white communities.

Furthermore, the resegregation within desegregated schools—across classrooms and spaces where students congregated when not in class—was real, palpable, and strongly reinforced by the distance between the homes, families, and cultures of the different racial and ethnic student populations. It was further reinforced by unequal opportunities prior to and outside high school and by too many educators who were biased against students of color in assessing ability and intelligence and who, at the same time, thought it was better not to talk about race and thus to not deal with racial issues at all. Still, despite all this, some of these graduates recall meaningful attempts that they and their classmates made to reach across the wide racial divide and function as equals in a society that told them they were anything but.

In the end the larger societal message prevailed. Regardless of the cross-racial bonds formed within these schools, the adults who graduated from them went on to lead lives that were, for the most part, far more segregated than their high schools. The white graduates were more likely to have reaped the benefits of an economy that for the last twenty-five years has greatly increased income inequality, rewarding the rich and the upper middle class while leaving the lower middle class and the poor behind. It was not that these white graduates actively avoided more racially diverse adult experiences but that their economic success relative to that of their parents led them to live in communities and engage in social networks that were, by virtue of their privilege, likely to be predominantly

white. Even when they did find themselves in more diverse settings, they were generally associating with Asians as opposed to African Americans or Latinos.

Meanwhile, the black and Latino graduates of these schools, with few exceptions, worked harder than their white counterparts to escape racially isolated adulthoods—in part because they knew from their high school experiences that they could compete in mostly white settings where they would have greater access to status and opportunity. Yet even these black and Latino graduates who pursued and gained entry to more integrated workplaces and neighborhoods maintained mostly same-race social networks and friends. Thus the vast majority of the graduates we interviewed felt that school desegregation had been valuable to them on many levels, but they had learned that the racial mix they had been exposed to on a daily basis at school was not sustainable as they moved on into adulthood in a still-segregated society.

We concluded, after analyzing all these stories, that school desegregation did fundamentally change the people who lived through it—making them more accepting of those who are different from them and more comfortable in racially diverse settings—but that it had a far more limited impact on the larger society, which has remained highly separate and unequal along racial lines.³ In fact, when these students graduated from their racially diverse public schools, there were very few neighborhoods they could move to or institutions they could join that looked like their schools. As a result, middle-aged graduates of desegregated schools such as Larry are perplexed. They told us that they believed, back in the late 1970s, that they were being prepared for the “real world,” which they envisioned as an ever-more-integrated society. They thought that as first-generation graduates of desegregated schools in many cases they were at the forefront of major social changes. Yet after graduation they arrived at this so-called real world only to find it far more racially segregated than their schools had been, with few signs of meaningful change.

Thus we learned that racially diverse public schools of the late 1970s were doing more than other major institutions in our society—except perhaps the military—to bring people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds together and foster equal opportunity. But they could not, on

their own, fulfill the promise of the Supreme Court's 1954 landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, which declared that racially separate schools were inherently unequal and implied that our best hope for greater equality lay in integrated public education.⁴ At the time of the *Brown* ruling, it may have seemed plausible to the Supreme Court justices that the schools could carry such a heavy burden,⁵ but our interviews with 540 people suggest, in hindsight, that this was too much to ask of one institution.⁶

Still, we should not interpret the attempts of officials and educators across the country to racially desegregate their public schools between the late 1960s and mid-1980s as a collective failure. We know from prior research on the quantifiable effects of school desegregation on students that there are numerous short- and long-term benefits, and our study certainly confirms many of these findings.⁷ And when we note that the graduates we studied tend to lead far more racially segregated lives today than they did in high school, we do not mean to imply that their school experiences led them to seek segregation as adults. Indeed, as we explain in later chapters of this book, many of these graduates, especially the black and Latino graduates, live in more integrated communities than the average American. Furthermore, our interview data suggest that white graduates of desegregated schools are more willing than most whites in the United States to live and work in racially diverse settings.

Still, absent a broader societal effort to break down what sociologists call structural inequality, or the rigid patterns of racial segregation that are embedded in the policies and practices of our society, graduates of these and other desegregated schools are likely to lead adult lives that are more separated by race than their public schools were. These patterns—in the housing market, the labor market, and places of worship and other voluntary organizations—tend to channel people of different races in this country in different directions, almost always resulting in more advantages for affluent whites. Individuals can and do try to counter these trends—most often in workplaces although occasionally in housing—but such options are limited, since pervasive racial segregation and inequality mean that racially integrated neighborhoods remain the exception and not the rule for most home buyers. Even work settings, which are

increasingly diverse by necessity because of our country's changing demographics, tend to be highly stratified along racial lines, with darker-skinned workers doing more menial jobs, often in physical spaces and work schedules separate from those of their higher-paid colleagues. This form of "segmented diversity" means that much interracial contact at work reinforces racial inequality and contributes to the large gaps in income and wealth across racial and ethnic groups.⁸

What we learned, therefore, is that efforts to desegregate public schools for a short time in the mid-twentieth century were simply the beginning of what should have been a long and comprehensive journey toward a more integrated society—a journey that has been aborted instead of expanded since that time. We write this book wondering when and if our leaders will ever wake up to the rapidly increasing diversity of this country—now that only 66 percent of the general population and 58 percent of the school-age population are non-Hispanic whites⁹—and recognize that the ongoing racial segregation in housing and now increasingly in our public schools needs to be addressed.

As we were finishing this book, the U.S. Supreme Court, in June 2007, provided a disappointing answer to this question by ruling that school integration plans that take the racial identity of individual students into account when assigning them to schools are unconstitutional. This ruling addressed issues of race-conscious policies in two cases—one from Louisville, Kentucky, and one from Seattle, Washington—where district officials had provided families with multiple choices of schools and then attempted to assign students to their first-choice schools while also balancing each school according to race. This effort to balance the students by race, therefore, meant that in a small number of cases students were assigned to their second- or third-choice schools. Parents of a few white students who did not get their first choices sued each of these school districts, arguing that their children's rights had been violated because of their race.

The Court's ruling in these cases—*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*—significantly narrowed local officials' options to racially balance school enrollments and stabilize their districts by making schools

more equal. Furthermore, the ruling will most likely have widespread implications for the kind of race-conscious policies that are still permissible in public education or any other sector of society, according to the separate opinion of Justice Kennedy, who embraced the goal of racial desegregation in public schools but not the means by which most school districts achieve that goal, namely taking into account the race/ethnicity of each student.¹⁰ Kennedy suggested that other means that take the race of a neighborhood into account when building new schools or drawing attendance boundaries are permissible, as is targeted recruitment of students according to race. But the mechanisms that have been most helpful in actually creating and maintain racially diverse schools—paying attention to the race of each student and making a student's race/ethnicity one factor in deciding who goes where—are no longer allowed.

Thus, even if policy makers do turn their attention to these pressing issues of racial segregation, they will have far fewer mechanisms they can use to make a difference. At the same time, they should be encouraged by our findings, knowing that millions of graduates of desegregated schools would agree with them if they chose to support the value of integration in an increasingly diverse society.

Yet even absent a Supreme Court ruling curtailing school districts' racial integration efforts, talk of racial integration is one thing and actually making meaningful change is something else. After all, many of the white graduates of diverse high schools are themselves relatively privileged forty-somethings currently ensconced in the status quo. Thus we would expect that most of those who, like Larry, are better off today economically than they were in high school would resist radical change that could result in a redistribution of opportunities in this society. Yet we argue that even within these political confines there is room to do much more than has been done in the last two decades to create a more equal and integrated society.

The story of these graduates of desegregated schools—a cohort of Americans who, more than any others, have seen our racially divided society from “both sides”—helps us learn some important lessons from the past that reconcile the contradictory legacies of the civil rights movement. As we explain in the following section, while there are clear signs

of progress over the last half-century since the *Brown* decision, there is far less progress than many had hoped to see. For instance, we have witnessed the expansion of the black middle class and thus the tremendous mobility of many African Americans, but at the same time we see entrenched racial divisions and long-lasting inequality continuing to confound a society that refuses to look too closely for explanations. This book helps us understand critical aspects of the last thirty years of American history that explain some of these two-sided results. The life course of the high school class of 1980 is particularly illustrative. These graduates were born in the midst of the civil rights movement and came of age in the 1980s. Thus they have a unique perspective on the dramatic social and political changes that occurred during the late 1970s and early 1980s in particular—changes that continue to affect racial politics and domestic policy today. In this way, they help us understand how we got where we are today and what is needed to make meaningful change.

RACIAL INEQUALITY AND SEPARATENESS:
THE CLOSING AND REOPENING GAPS

Since the high school class of 1980 was born in the early 1960s, there have been significant advances in racial equality in this country. From the mid-1950s to the early 1970s, different branches of the federal government supported meaningful civil rights policies such as the *Brown* decision, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and two other critical school desegregation rulings: *Green* (1968) and *Swan* (1971), which finally forced school districts to dismantle state-imposed segregation.

The Progress of the Civil Rights Era

Overall, from the mid-1960s until the mid- to late 1990s, disparities between black and whites in terms of educational attainment and household income narrowed fairly dramatically, leading to a significant increase in the black middle class.¹¹ For instance, the black-white gap in

high school completion rates for people ages twenty-five to twenty-nine declined from 20 percentage points in 1967 to about 7 points by 1997. During the same time period, the median household income for blacks increased by 24 percent.¹² As a result, the proportion of African Americans considered middle class rose from about 10 percent in 1960 to about 50 percent today.

The evidence suggests that the civil rights policies, along with a shift in what was socially acceptable in terms of racial hatred and discrimination, the hard work of many African Americans, and the growth in government jobs, which blacks are twice as likely to hold, led to meaningful progress.¹³ Furthermore, there are signs that these gains are positively shaping the opportunities of the next generation of the black middle class. In 1999, for instance, 60 percent of all black freshmen entering selective colleges had a father who had graduated from college, and 25 percent came from families earning more than \$100,000 per year.¹⁴

Another sign of mobility among African Americans is the departure of large numbers of middle-class blacks from central cities to suburban communities, following a trail blazed by middle-class whites decades ago. According to the 2000 Census, about 40 percent of all African Americans now live in suburban communities, where more and more “people of color are increasingly making the dream of suburban home ownership a reality.”¹⁵

While these statistics depict noteworthy gains for African Americans in the last four decades, a closer look at the data reveals that the most significant improvements occurred—or had their foundations laid—in the first half of that forty-year period. From the early 1980s onward, the picture is far less rosy, even as our nation has become increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. Gaps in economic and educational outcomes for whites and African Americans remain wide and, in some cases, have increased since the class of 1980 left high school.

Remaining and Widening Gaps

Despite the growth of the black middle class in the last half-century, in the last thirty years the gap in median family income between blacks and

whites has closed by only 4 percent, from 58 to 62 percent.¹⁶ Even in the late 1990s, when the African American poverty rate hit a historic low of 23.6 percent, it remained nearly 2.5 times the poverty rate of whites.¹⁷ The African American unemployment rate in 2005 of 10.8 percent was 2.3 times the white unemployment rate of 4.7 percent.¹⁸ And blacks, even those who have held the same job for many years, are far more likely to be laid off during an economic downturn, making their income status far more precarious.¹⁹

Meanwhile, a statistic with longer-term implications for inequality along racial lines, the median net worth of black families, was still less than one-tenth that of whites (\$6,100 versus \$67,000) in 2005.²⁰ Richard Rothstein argues that there are several reasons for the ongoing racial gap in wealth, many of which speak to the rampant racial discrimination in the housing market after World War II, when both the federal government and private lenders discouraged or prohibited blacks from buying homes in the suburban communities where values have appreciated most.²¹

Indeed, recent research on housing segregation in the United States is not encouraging. One set of authors sum it up as follows: "Despite the decline in group inequality and rapid expansion of the black middle class, residential segregation remains a striking feature of the urban landscape in many large metropolitan areas with significant black populations."²²

Racial housing segregation has varied across place and time to some extent but not across social classes or urban-suburban boundaries. For instance, as the authors above note, the larger the black population in a given metropolitan area, the more segregation there will be within that context. Thus major cities that attracted millions of African Americans during their migration from the rural South to the urban North in the first half of the twentieth century are extremely segregated. Meanwhile cities and towns with smaller black populations, particularly those in the West, show signs of greater integration. Related to this phenomenon is a geographic difference in segregation, with the cities in the Northeast and Midwest more segregated than those in the West and South.²³ According to a study on racial segregation in the twenty-first century: "Desegregation

has been slowest precisely in the places African Americans are most likely to live. There, racial isolation can be extreme. For example in the Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland metropolitan areas, most African Americans live in census tracts (roughly, neighborhoods) where more than 90 percent of the residents are black and fewer than 6 percent are white."²⁴

Indeed, this high degree of housing segregation in the metropolitan areas where most blacks reside is pervasive across urban-suburban lines and social class boundaries. In other words, segregation is a defining feature of the suburbs as well as the cities and for the more middle class as well as the poor. Even as more working- and middle-class black and Latinos move out of poor neighborhoods into the suburbs, the color line moves with them. The literature on housing segregation suggests that levels of segregation experienced by black households in particular are "uniformly high across all income categories" and that "white and black households at all levels of income, education and occupational status are nearly as segregated as are whites and blacks overall."²⁵

Thus in many metro areas today the inner-ring suburbs—especially those that are less affluent and have more moderately priced houses—have become all African American and/or Latino. Meanwhile, the affluent whites have either moved back into expensive enclaves in the cities or moved farther away to the outer suburbs or "exurbs." It is not uncommon to find these mostly white exurbs dotted with so-called McMansions, or huge newly built homes, often ensconced in gated communities. As one of the fastest-growing segments of the housing market, these gated communities further separate white and affluent Americans from darker-skinned people, who generally enter the gates only to clean houses, manicure lawns, and care for the white people who live inside.²⁶

Looking historically at the ebb, flow, and persistence of racially segregated housing in this country, we should expect the data to look better by now. Historically, residential segregation worsened during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century as millions of blacks migrated from the southern fields to the northern cities. By 1970, housing segregation in the United States had reached staggering levels, the result of state-imposed and state-supported policies of discrimination as well as white resistance

to integration. After this highpoint in 1970 some progress was made, particularly prior to 1990, as small numbers of blacks moved into predominantly white neighborhoods, but few if any whites moved into all-black neighborhoods.²⁷ In fact, today the average white person in the United States continues to live in a neighborhood that is 80 percent white and only 7 percent black. Meanwhile, a typical African American lives in a neighborhood that is only 33 percent white and more than half black.

Thus the post-1970s progress in terms of housing segregation has not been great enough to undo the extreme segregation that was systematically put in place over several decades. Furthermore, reports based on the 2000 Census data find that in the 1990s we made less progress toward integration than we did in the 1980s. In fact, according to one report on these data, we appear to be losing ground as our “growing ethnic diversity in the nation is accompanied by a high degree of residential separation.”²⁸

This ongoing segregation exacerbates a system of inequality, as whites and more affluent Asians are able to move into communities with fewer working-class or poor neighbors. Through this spatial separation of those with more resources from those with less, affluent communities can ensure that they have the best public services, including public schools. Removed from needy communities physically and politically, the well off are less likely to care about those who are poor.²⁹ Meanwhile, middle-class blacks are far more likely than middle-class whites to live in poor neighborhoods with all of the social problems associated with concentrated poverty. In this way “separate translates into unequal even for the most successful black and Hispanic minorities.”³⁰

While a host of present-day forces maintain this high-level of housing segregation, the literature suggests that white racial attitudes and unwillingness to live in neighborhoods that are more than 20 percent black are central factors. Indeed, one study noted that while blacks’ preferences for neighborhoods that are at least 50 percent black as well as income differences between whites and blacks play a part, whites’ attitudes play the most essential role in maintaining racial segregation.³¹ Furthermore, the authors note that much of the research suggests that the best way to change whites’ attitudes is to improve their knowledge of blacks through

either interracial contact or education on racial issues. Still, their conclusion based on their findings is that interracial contact and not racially isolated education is the best and perhaps the only way to meaningfully change whites' attitudes: "Optimism lies in the finding that neighbourhood and workplace contact affect white preferences in favour of integrated neighbourhoods. Inter-racial contact has been on the increase, especially in the workplace and this augurs well for future integration. On the other hand, the results lend little support for the hypotheses that greater integration will result as the percentage of whites with college degrees expands."³²

Interestingly enough, the high school graduates of 1980 that we studied carried their interracial contact experiences with them into adulthood, where they encountered a separate and unequal housing market. While our findings support the argument stated above that prior interracial contact in their schools did indeed make individuals more open to the idea of housing integration, their willingness on its own proved to be too small a factor in most cases when it was challenged by their choice of neighborhoods, most of which were far more segregated in terms of race and class than their high schools. Furthermore, like many Americans, these graduates state that they are most likely to have interracial contact in their workplaces, but those workplaces, as we noted above, are often highly stratified by class, status, and race in ways that make workplace interaction more hierarchical across racial lines. And unlike their high schools, which were also stratified because they were too often tracked into separate and unequal classrooms, the graduates' adult workplaces do not have the extracurricular programs, including athletics, student government, and drama, that often brought them together across racial lines when they were in school.

Layered Inequality

To fully appreciate the context of the class of 1980's adulthood and what has happened to these graduates since they left high school, we must examine some critical and defining economic changes over the last two and a half decades. If the entrenched racial segregation discussed above

were not enough, we have seen, in the last twenty-five years, another, overlapping form of inequality develop along social class lines. Indeed, by the time the class of 1980 entered the workforce, the postindustrial global economy had begun to fuel greater economic inequality, with huge and growing gaps between the haves and have-nots.³³

Since the late 1970s, we have seen the rich get richer while the poor and middle class have just tried to hang on to what they have, often while working more hours and sending more family members off to work. Unlike the prior era (1950s–70s), which saw a compression of incomes and the creation of a stronger and better-off middle class, the last quarter-century has led to deeper and wider divisions in terms of income and wealth.³⁴ According to one report, between 1950 and 1970, for every dollar earned by the bottom 90 percent of the population, those in the top 0.01 percent earned an additional \$162. But from 1990 to 2002, for every dollar earned by the bottom 90 percent, those in the top 0.01 percent earned \$18,000.³⁵

By the time the high school graduates of 1980 were looking for adult jobs, serious social and economic changes were occurring that led to a legitimization of the “deserving rich.” Between 1989 and 2000, when median hourly wages grew by just 5.9 percent, CEO compensation increased by 342 percent to an average of \$1.7 million per year. “In 1978, the average CEO made 37 times what the average worker made; by 2000, the average CEO made 310 times what the average worker earned.”³⁶ By 2004, the United States held the distinction of having the greatest income and wealth disparities of any advanced industrial society.³⁷

Because this growing income inequality was laid down on top of several layers of racial segregation and inequality that so strongly defined our country by the mid-twentieth century, it should come as no surprise that the vast majority of the “fortunate fifth” who have most benefited from these economic shifts are whites. In other words, the new form of extreme income inequality did not replace the preexisting racial inequality; it just exacerbated it. Indeed, one analysis of 2000 Census data reveals that the decade (1990–2000) of widespread prosperity “did not yield greater income or neighborhood equality for blacks and Hispanics.”³⁸

To make matters worse, the growing gap in income and wealth between the rich and nonrich has coincided with a political backlash

against public policies, including affirmative action and school desegregation, designed to correct or even out major inequality in American society along several dimensions, especially race.³⁹ Efforts to end such policies have been legitimized by a general acceptance of wide economic disparity as “natural” and thus not requiring intervention. Indeed, resistance to such policies has been most fervent among whites who are in the “unfortunate four-fifths” at the bottom of the social class hierarchy.⁴⁰ This translates into an ongoing racial divide among middle-class and poor Americans, ensuring that the interests of the very rich and powerful will not be challenged by a meaningful political coalition of have-nots.⁴¹

For better or worse, the adult lives of high school graduates of 1980 have been profoundly shaped by these trends toward more socioeconomic segregation and inequality and an ongoing racial divide. Many of the graduates we interviewed have benefited economically from these shifts, even as they have wondered how their priorities and those of the society could change so drastically in just half their lifetime. And, as we discuss in a later chapter, many of these graduates became even more aware of how dramatically different the current era is from their childhood years when they had children of their own and faced decisions about where to educate them and with whom. Similar to the way in which the broader society influenced their school experiences many years ago, the growing racial and ethnic diversity in the United States, coupled with the rise in inequality over the last twenty-five years and the backlash against policies that try to correct it, has led to more racial separateness in our public schools and a growing gap in educational outcomes across racial lines—the very gap that their desegregated schooling experiences were designed to fix.

*Public Education: Becoming More Separate
and More Unequal*

Intertwined with the growth of the black middle class over the last fifty years, significant gains have been made in equalizing educational opportunities since the beginning of the civil rights movement. Yet, like the economic developments discussed above, these gains are less than many

had hoped for, and while we witnessed a rapid narrowing of the gap between the educational outcomes of students of color and those of white students beginning in the 1970s, these gains have stagnated or reversed since the mid-1980s.

Table 1 shows the narrowing and widening black-white gaps on several educational indicators from the early 1970s until 2000. As the data clearly illustrate, many indicators of black and Latino students' achievement and attainment show impressive progress during the years when meaningful civil rights policies were being put in place in schools and communities around the country.

It seems more than coincidental that these years during which the black-white achievement gap was closing correspond with the years that students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to be in the same schools and thus in closer proximity to the same curriculum, teachers, and school resources and status.⁴² This was also the period of American history when African American students were least likely to be enrolled in high-poverty schools.⁴³

Since the mid-1980s, shortly after the graduates we studied had moved on to college or work, public schools in the United States became more separate and unequal—more racially and socioeconomically segregated, with larger gaps in terms of resources, curriculum, and opportunities between the most affluent suburban and the poorest urban schools. According to reports issued by the Civil Rights Project, levels of segregation for black and Latino students have been steadily increasing since the mid-1980s. In fact, between 1991 and 2002 the percentage of African American students attending predominantly black schools grew as much as 10 percent in some areas of the country. Meanwhile, the percentage of Latino students attending predominantly Latino schools grew by as much as 18 percent in some states.⁴⁴

In 2002–3, the average white student attended a school that was almost 80 percent white, while the average black and Latino students attended schools that were 30 and 28 percent white, respectively. Thus, while the U.S. student population in K–12 schools is still majority white, most students of color attend schools that are substantially segregated—70 percent or more black and/or Latino.⁴⁵

Table 1 Indicators of educational achievement and attainment by racial/ethnic groups from the early 1970s to 2000

<i>Educational Achievement or Attainment Measure by Years^a</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>African American</i>	<i>African American–White Gap</i>	<i>Latino</i>	<i>Latino–White Gap</i>
% Aged 16–24-Year-Olds Who Dropped out of High School^b					
1972	12	21	9	34	22
1986	10	14	4	30	20
2000	7	13	6	28	21
% Aged 18–24 Who Completed High School^b					
1972	88	72	–16	56	–32
1986	90	82	–8	64	–26
2000	92	84	–8	64	–28
Average NAEP Reading Scores for 13-Year-Olds^c					
1971	261	222	–39	n/a	n/a
1984	263	236	–27	240	–23
1988	261	243	–18	240	–21
1999	267	238	–29	240	–23
Average NAEP Math Scores for 13-Year-Olds^c					
1973	274	228	–46	239	–35
1982	274	240	–34	252	–22
1986	274	249	–25	254	–20
1999	283	251	–32	259	–24

SOURCE: Kathryn Hoffman, Charmaine Llagas, and Thomas D. Snyder, *Status and Trends in the Education of Blacks*, NCES 2003–034 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, September 2003), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/2003034.pdf> (accessed January 22, 2008).

a. Different measures are for different years because the National Center for Educational Statistics' reports on these measures come out in different years.

b. Data for these measures were derived from a graph, so the specific numbers for any one year or racial group may be off by 1 percent.

c. NAEP is the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a battery of tests given to a random sample of students across the country.

Hand in hand with this increasing racial and ethnic segregation is a more intense concentration of poverty in predominantly black and/or Latino schools, making the separate schools more unequal. As Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee report, 88 percent of high-minority schools—those with enrollments that are more than 90 percent minority—are also high-poverty schools, meaning that more than 50 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches. The corresponding share of so-called low-minority schools (those with less than 10 percent students of color) that are also high-poverty schools is 15 percent. The reality of segregation by race and poverty means that, while the majority of white students attend middle-class schools, minority students are more likely to attend racially segregated schools in which most of their classmates are poor.⁴⁶ This highly concentrated poverty in schools, Orfield and Lee note, is one of the single best predictors of student failure and dropout. “Segregated schools are unequal and there is very little evidence of any success in creating ‘separate but equal’ outcomes on a large scale.”⁴⁷

In the meantime, our society—especially our school-age population—has become much more racially and ethnically diverse. As we noted above, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 2003 the percentage of students in the public schools nationwide who were white had dropped to 58 percent—down from 78 percent in the 1973. Meanwhile, Hispanics or Latinos now constitute 19 percent of the K–12 public school population—more than triple their 6 percent in 1973. Another 16 percent of these students are African Americans, and the “other” category, which includes a wide range of Asian students as well as Native Americans, is 7 percent.⁴⁸

Thus we find ourselves with a far more diverse school-age population and more segregated and unequal schools than thirty years ago when the class of 1980 was in high school. And while some have argued that the increase in racial segregation has more to do with the shrinking white population,⁴⁹ others respond that multiple factors contribute to greater racial isolation in public schools and that demographic shifts in the overall population do not entirely explain it. Indeed, if that were the case, white students would be far less isolated and there would not be such profound proportional differences in segregation levels across regions

and contexts that have made drastically different efforts to overcome school segregation via public policies in the past.⁵⁰ Arguably this very real impact of public policies on racial isolation within schools is even more ironic in the current era of educational reform, which, as we demonstrate below, appears to be guided by the “separate but equal” doctrine that the *Brown* decision denounced.

Current Educational Policy

Indeed, over the last twenty-five years in particular, the educational policy priorities in this country have shifted away from fostering integration and diversity in the K-12 system toward trying to educate all children to high standards within the context of increasingly racially and socioeconomically segregated schools. Paradoxically, this shift has coincided with widening gaps in achievement and attainment along racial and ethnic lines, after these had begun closing during the peak years of school desegregation, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. The response of the federal government to this trend was to take the concept of standards one step further. In his first year in office President George W. Bush sponsored federal legislation, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which requires more testing for students and a strict accountability system of sanctions associated with schools’ failure to make progress in meeting benchmarks for student outcomes. Furthermore, test score data are broken down by student “subgroups” defined according to race/ethnicity, poverty, gender, disability, and limited English proficiency. This provision, in theory, will help schools and the government ensure that no children are being left behind.⁵¹

In the years since its passage, however, the rhetoric of No Child Left Behind has not matched its reality. Thus, in addition to a plethora of complaints from school officials about how onerous the policy is to implement, researchers and educators have argued that the sanctions and punishments associated with school failings under this act are laid down upon a highly unequal educational system in which some students—particularly those in high-poverty schools—have access to far fewer resources and opportunities.⁵² Furthermore, the law has been underfunded

since the year it was passed, meaning that the inequalities in the educational system are not being offset by federal funding targeted toward poor students.⁵³

Yet despite the alarming levels of inequality beneath the surface of the standards movement, the majority of policy makers, journalists, and commentators seem convinced in recent years that the best way to achieve greater equity in the American educational system is not through policies that try to address the segregation and concentration of poverty or the inequality across school sites but rather through policies that hold separate and unequal schools equally accountable for student outcomes. Accordingly, President Bush claimed that his new policy would attack “the soft bigotry of low expectations” for low-income students and students of color,⁵⁴ thereby closing the educational gap by forcing teachers who work in poor schools to hold their students to higher standards; but at the same time the federal government has done little to overcome the inequality in the educational system and the larger society that so profoundly influences students’ achievement and life chances.⁵⁵

Some of the most prominent news coverage of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown* decision in spring 2004 focused on how school accountability systems or court cases providing poor schools with more “adequate” (but not equal) funding had replaced desegregation as the promise of greater educational equity.⁵⁶ While more funding for poor school districts serving poor students of color is worth fighting for, suburban-dominated state legislatures have been loath to allocate such funds even when state judges rule that they must. Also, there is little reason to believe that, if all else remains the same—especially the high concentrations of rich and poor students in different rich and poor communities and schools—adequate funding will create equal educational opportunities.⁵⁷

In essence, it appeared as though the *Brown* anniversary commentators were settling for the promise of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 Supreme Court ruling that argued for “separate but equal” accommodations for black and white train passengers, despite the lack of evidence that such a condition can or does exist in the field of education. In this way, the coverage of the *Brown* anniversary allowed white Americans to absolve themselves of any

responsibility for the perpetual segregation and inequality in our society and to lay the blame and burden of the achievement gap back on educators and poor students and their families. The angle of much of the anniversary coverage was that all that was needed to close the gap was more standardized testing and punitive measures for educators and students who did not raise scores sufficiently or in a timely manner.⁵⁸ This is an example of both a misguided and an exaggerated understanding of the role of schools in society as the single institution that can equalize the many inequalities that most adults turn their backs on every day.⁵⁹

Thus it appears that we have arrived at the beginning of the twenty-first century with racial inequality and severe segregation firmly in place and a political climate in which no one is willing to do anything about it. We have accomplished this at the same time that most whites in the United States argue that enough has been done to solve racial problems in this country—"been there, did that" with the civil rights movement. Any ongoing inequality, they are now thoroughly convinced, is simply the result of black (and Hispanic) people's laziness or lack of family values.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, most people of color, especially blacks and Latinos, see our recent history quite differently. They have an insight into race in America that most whites do not because of what W. E. B. DuBois termed "double consciousness."⁶¹ Yet as we discuss below, some scholars have argued that there is also a white version of double consciousness about race that is quite distinct in its meaning and implication.

AMERICA'S DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

Throughout the history of the United States, different social observers have reminded Americans that a large gap exists between our rhetoric of equality and liberty for all and the reality of our situation. Gunnar Myrdal, a Swedish economist who traveled this country for many months in the early 1940s, argued that the gap between what he called the American Creed and the conditions of the American Negro presented an ever-raging conflict that had to be resolved if our democracy was to be maintained. The Negroes' lack of rights and freedoms, Myrdal stated,

represented a glaring inconsistency with the tenets of our constitution and democratic society.⁶²

Myrdal's well-publicized book, a growing impatience and effective protests on the part of African Americans, and cries of hypocrisy from our Cold War enemies were three of the main factors that led this country into the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, which in turn provided the impetus for many of the federal Great Society policies of the 1960s and 1970s.⁶³ And while not all white Americans were as convinced as Myrdal in the 1940s or 1950s that the government needed to address racial inequality with fairly bold public policies, as time went on and the Jim Crow era of state-mandated segregation and separate drinking fountains faded into the past, most whites came to accept some degree of change as necessary and good.

For instance, public opinion data show that attitudes changed rather dramatically in the years following the 1954 *Brown* decision. In fact, the proportion of Americans of all races who believed that the Supreme Court was right in its *Brown* decision increased from 63 percent in the early 1960s to 87 percent in the mid-1990s. And in the South, where only 19 percent of the people agreed with the landmark ruling in 1954, in the 1990s, only 15 percent said they did *not* agree with the ruling. This marks a dramatic shift in attitudes in the region of the country that had most strongly resisted change.⁶⁴

Still, support for the *Brown* decision, which struck down the use of blatant, state-sanctioned racial segregation, and support for what some consider more aggressive or proactive public policies such as affirmative action and school desegregation plans that require busing students across towns are two different things.⁶⁵ But as the 1960s, with its economic expansion and sense of national prosperity and optimism, gave way to the 1970s, with its economic stagnation and sense of disillusionment following Watergate and an unsatisfactory ending to the war in Vietnam, whites' views toward the civil rights movement and the war on poverty, which had never been overwhelmingly positive on average, began to sour.⁶⁶

A conservative political movement would soon change the policy agenda in education and other public policy arenas. By the time the class of

1980 graduated from high school, in the midst of the Iranian hostage crisis, an economic recession, and a severe oil shortage, Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign was already fueling a powerful backlash against the civil rights movement and the Great Society policies of the 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁷

The result of this backlash of white voters against policies of redistribution and greater access and opportunity for poor people and people of color has been a political era in which ongoing racial inequality is defined in very personal and individualistic terms.⁶⁸ The new "common sense" is that racism no longer exists and that the civil rights movement removed the barriers to mobility for African Americans, so that the only logical conclusion to be drawn about poor people, especially black or Latino poor people, is that they have created many of their own problems.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, most blacks and Latinos argue that many of their problems still stem from racial discrimination and institutions and policies that maintain advantages—or privileges—for whites. The housing market would be but one example of such a structure in which racial discrimination helps to maintain segregation, which in turn allows whites to earn more from their property investments than do blacks or Latinos. In 1992, for instance, 29 percent of poor blacks and 21 percent of middle-class blacks agreed that "whites want to keep blacks down."⁷⁰

Clearly, the ongoing problems of racial inequality and segregation look different from different sides of the color line. But complex and conflicting attitudes about race and equality also exist within racial groups—and within the souls of individuals.

Black Double Consciousness

More than forty years before Myrdal published his well-known book on the American dilemma, *W. E. B. DuBois*, an African American sociologist with keen insight into social phenomena, published a collection of essays on race titled *The Souls of Black Folk*. In the first essay, DuBois states boldly that the so-called "Negro Problem" is a "concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic" and that "blacks' souls bear this burden in the name of this land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity."⁷¹

Two of DuBois's critical points in this book have been embraced by many readers as its defining principles. First, DuBois wrote persuasively that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line. Second, he wrote about a sort of "double consciousness," a second sight that blacks possessed because they lived on one side of that color line, behind a veil of racial inequality and segregation through which they could see much more than they themselves could be seen.

The Negro is sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁷²

It has been said by DuBois and the many scholars who draw on his work that this double consciousness is a gift of a deeper insight that allows African Americans to see and understand life on both sides of the veil of race—or the color line that divides blacks from whites. For instance, Charles Lemert argues that the double consciousness is a "*gift of second-sight*—that is, the gift of a power that comes to those who, while held in contempt, exploit the shadows to see the world more deeply."⁷³

Meanwhile, others have described DuBois's notion of double consciousness as *both* a gift and a burden. Lawrie Balfour writes: "It is second-sight, a way of seeing that which escapes notice by the White majority" and allows blacks to observe the distance between the American ideals—or the Creed—and American practices of systematic racial degradation. This double consciousness then "provides insight into the content of American promises as they are not understood by those who have the luxury of taking those promises for granted."⁷⁴

In other words, to those who possess the double consciousness, the American promises embodied in the Creed that Myrdal describes cannot be taken for granted and must be fought for continually. That is the gift

and the burden—the insight into the injustice and the responsibility to try to make this society good on its promises.

DuBois argued that the history of American Negroes is the history of this very strife and the longing to merge their double selves into a better and truer self—one less conflicted but still ever watchful and insightful. Yet in this merging, DuBois wrote, the Negro wishes neither of the old selves—the African or the American—to be lost. What the Negro wants, DuBois writes, is to be both a Negro and an American, without “having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”⁷⁵

Henry Louis Gates Jr., in a *New York Times* article with the same title as this book, notes that DuBois wanted to make the American Negro whole and believed that only desegregation and full equality could make this psychic integration possible.⁷⁶ Our study and interview data from African Americans and Latinos who attended racially mixed schools suggest that to some extent this psychic integration did occur for people of color who attended desegregated schools in the 1970s.⁷⁷

As we show in subsequent chapters of this book, these graduates of color have come to understand many things about themselves vis-à-vis their white classmates and teachers. Thus many have learned that in a white-dominated society they are more likely to gain access to the resources and opportunities they need to compete and succeed when they are in close proximity to whites—no matter how much these whites resist their presence or try to make them feel inferior. The schools and the classrooms that were predominantly white carried the reputations and the connections to take these students on to the best colleges and universities or job opportunities. Once schools and classrooms become predominantly black and/or Hispanic, they have learned, they will be perceived as far less desirable no matter what is going on inside in terms of teaching and learning.

In addition, the black and Latino graduates from the schools we studied learned that although the racial inequality and segregation outside schools definitely dictate the formation of cliques and friendships along racial lines, these barriers can be bridged in subtle ways that promote greater understanding and trust across racial lines. As one African American graduate of Shaker Heights High School reported: “It worked

for most . . . seeing that there was some natural divisions at lunch, but being able to bridge that in the classroom, being able to bridge that in intramural sports, being able to bridge that with friendships through those events . . . that was the best teacher that anybody could have ever provided. You couldn't have taught that in a debriefing session for adults, you know, trying to get into the mind of a sixteen-year-old."

For this generation of African Americans, born in the midst of the civil rights movement and participants in many of the policies and programs designed to confront racial inequality, the veil behind which they view the white society and its understanding of them has been partly lifted. It is still there, and they still sense their "twoness" of being black and being American, but they are one step closer to the kind of psychic integration DuBois saw as the answer. But being only one step closer to something that has been so long in the making—so much longer than any writer in 1903 could have imagined—and seeing that the next generation may be on the verge of taking a half-step backwards makes the goal less desirable today than it was at the beginning of the twentieth century.

While much has been written about black double consciousness, far less has been published (at least in English) about the double consciousness of Latinos or whites. Interestingly enough, the work of Theresa Martinez partly applies the DuBoisian ideas of "two warring ideals in one dark body" and the veil to the analysis of what Gloria Anzaldúa has called "mestiza consciousness," adding issues of gender and sexuality to the analysis of oppression of people of color.⁷⁸

Another social theory that explores a form of "double consciousness" is "whiteness" theory, which examines the manifestation of white privilege. In fact, a growing number of social theorists are considering the two-sidedness of that privilege in a manner that relates to the yearnings and contradictions of the white graduates we interviewed.

The New Double Consciousness of Whites

One of the more interesting developments in the study of race in the last two decades is scholars' efforts to uncover and depict whites' understanding of race, their own racial identity, and the persistence of

racial inequality in American society.⁷⁹ Theories about whites and their identities as raceless and as “the norm” against which all darker-skinned souls must be judged have helped to explain many white people’s attitudes toward people of color and their frustration with public policies, such as affirmative action and school desegregation, that take race into account. These writings on whiteness help explain the general understanding on the white side of the color line that there is far more equality and integration than in fact exists and thus the firm belief among many whites that the government needs to do little or nothing else to help people of color. In fact, to do more is, according to many whites, a form of favoritism and reverse discrimination.⁸⁰ At the same time, in the post-civil rights era, these same whites claim to be strong supporters of equal opportunities for all and see slavery and Jim Crow as evils that we have now, thankfully, overcome. As Derald Sue notes, “Most Whites were socialized into oppressor roles yet taught concepts of social democracy, fairness, justice, and equality.”⁸¹

Howard Winant’s theories of white racial identity in particular help us make sense of the often conflicting ways in which the white graduates from our study talk about race and their own lives. Winant espouses a theory of “white racial dualism” that he calls a way of extending to whites the “Du Boisian idea that in a racist society the ‘color line’ fractures the self.” Winant argues that this idea can be extrapolated to whites at the turn of the century as the very idea of whiteness has been “deeply fissured by the racial conflicts of the post-civil rights period.” Since the 1960s and the civil rights movement’s language and rhetoric of equality and diversity, Winant notes, racial discourse that openly espouses the racial superiority of whites and thus justifies the exclusion of blacks and other people of color has been less accepted and less able to function in the public sphere. Therefore, he writes, “white identities have been displaced and refigured: They are now contradictory, as well as confused and anxiety-ridden, to an unprecedented extent. It is this situation that I describe as white racial dualism.”⁸²

According to Winant, this crisis of “whiteness”—in which the very meaning of whiteness is cast into doubt—does in fact relate to the greater, although limited, degree of racial equality in the post-civil rights

period. For example, the growth of the black middle class is one of the developments that challenges the historical meanings of whiteness, especially for whites who are struggling to maintain their own middle-class status in an increasingly unequal labor market. While these whites are far less likely to be wearing white hoods, burning down black houses and churches, or advocating for state-sanctioned segregation than their ancestors were, they may well feel that their very identity is threatened by social changes since the 1950s in particular and thus may consciously or subconsciously resist further change. According to Winant, therefore, the crisis of whiteness is simply the latest defense of white supremacy, which “now covers itself with the fig leaf of a formal egalitarianism.”

In other words, whites now too must cope with a double consciousness, though from a different standpoint in relation to the veil of racial inequality. Winant states: “On the one hand, whites inherit the legacy of white supremacy, from which they continue to benefit. But on the other hand, they are subject to the moral and political challenges posed to that inheritance by the partial but real success of the black movement (and affiliated movements).”⁸³

This form of white double consciousness leads to dualistic and often contradictory allegiances to both privilege *and* equality, both color consciousness *and* color blindness, both treating everyone “equally” regardless of skin color or histories of unequal treatment *and* supporting policies and programs that help remedy past injustices.⁸⁴ That whites can simultaneously hold all these views—with some remaining more fixed in one allegiance than the other—helps explain their often confusing and contradictory views on racial issues. We learned, for instance, that in the course of one hour-long interview it was not uncommon for a white graduate to speak fervently in support of each of these positions.

Of course this theory of white racial dualism also suggests that it may be easier now than in the past for whites to sway politically between supporting and strongly opposing certain race-specific policies. Politicians and journalists can convince whites to shift their allegiances in one direction or another on issues related to race and opportunities.⁸⁵ And several authors have argued that conservative political leaders, particularly

during the 1980s and 1990s, did just that. Icons such as Ronald Reagan talked the American public into a strident repudiation of policies and programs that assisted blacks or Latinos in gaining access to education, housing, and employment by framing all of the above as “reverse discrimination” and calling for a completely “color-blind” society. According to Walter Allen and Angie Chung, under the Reagan and George Bush administrations these new “rearticulations of race” wrapped in the gospel of color-blindness as fairness resulted in dramatic cutbacks on welfare programs, affirmative action policies, social services, education, health care, and promminority business branches.⁸⁶ Such a political philosophy serves what James Baldwin explained as the “consciousnesses of white Americans who aim to achieve racial equality by putting the past behind them without examining its traces in the present.”⁸⁷

In fact, this is clearly the direction the U.S. Supreme Court is headed in, and the Court’s 2007 ruling in the Louisville and Seattle school integration cases moves one giant step toward that goal. During the two hours of oral arguments in those cases in December 2006, both Chief Justice Roberts and the Bush administration’s solicitor general implied that race-conscious policies—those that take the race of students into account to achieve the goal of racial integration—were by their nature unconstitutional except when used to dismantle state-sanctioned or de jure segregation erected in the era of Jim Crow. According to the solicitor general, “The Constitution puts a particular premium on avoiding express racial classifications.”⁸⁸ Thus, despite years of implementing race-conscious policies as a way to overcome a legacy of racism, the federal government—at least the Supreme Court and the president—are turning their backs on such efforts, implying that any lingering racial inequality needs to be solved in other ways. As Justice Roberts wrote in the majority opinion in these cases, “Where resegregation is a product not of state action but of private choices, it does not have constitutional implications.”⁸⁹ Further, Roberts went on, citing other federal court rulings, race is a “group classification long recognized as in most circumstances irrelevant.”⁹⁰ Therefore, he concluded that government action based on race is generally prohibited. And in what is perhaps the most famous quote from the Supreme Court’s ruling in these two cases from Louisville and Seattle,

Chief Justice Roberts wrote: “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.”⁹¹

This strong embrace of a color-blind philosophy in a country still powerfully defined by race and a history of racial oppression—even as older, blatant forms of racism are eschewed—forces whites to look for new explanations for ongoing segregation. According to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, contemporary racial inequality is reproduced through “new racism” practices that are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial.

In contrast to the Jim Crow era, where racial inequality was enforced through overt means . . . today racial practices operate in “now you see it, now you don’t” fashion. For example, residential segregation, which is almost as high today as it was in the past, is no longer accomplished through overtly discriminatory practices. Instead, covert behaviors such as not showing all the available units, steering minorities and whites into certain neighborhoods, quoting higher rents or prices to minority applicants, or not advertising units at all are the weapons of choice to maintain separate communities.⁹²

This is the new common sense in a color-blind white America—where whites will talk at great length about how they do not judge people by the color of their skin but they will spend an extra \$200,000 to purchase a home with no black neighbors and few if any black students in their children’s schools. They will have very few black friends and will, in some instances, go to great lengths to disassociate themselves from blacks, especially in status-based institutions such as schools and private clubs. In this way, their white racial dualism—their DuBoisian double consciousness—tends to place them structurally in the safe spaces of white privilege. At the same time, being color-blind allows whites to ignore just how separate and unequal our society has become in the midst of rapidly changing demographics.⁹³

According to Bonilla-Silva, who writes extensively about “color-blind racism” and its impact on politics and public policy:

Taken together, whites’ views represent nothing less than a new, formidable racial ideology: new because the topics of color blindness have replaced, for the most part, those associated with Jim Crow racism; formidable because these topics leave little intellectual, moral,

and practical room for whites to support the policies that are needed to accomplish significant racial change in this country. Furthermore, because color-blind racism seems reasonable and has frames that are so different from those typical of Jim Crow racism, and because its style is so slippery, this new ideology provides an almost impenetrable defense of postmodern white supremacy.⁹⁴

More recently, as Bonilla-Silva points out, Larry Bobo and Philomena Essed have written about “laissez-faire racism” and “competitive racism” respectively. According to these theorists, racial ideology today is usually not portrayed in old-fashioned racist speech but rather is able to effectively safeguard racial privilege by applying the principles of liberalism to racial issues and problems in an abstract manner. It also protects the status quo by focusing on cultural differences between whites and minorities, particularly those with dark skin, as the reason for ongoing racial inequality in labor markets, income, and educational attainment. Although the ideas endorsed by most whites today may sound like “racism lite” or may seem devoid of racism altogether, they help to support the racial status quo. For instance, whites may say in opinion polls that they strongly support the idea of racial integration but at the same time strongly oppose any policies or programs that might bring such integration about. In this way, they will argue that policies such as affirmative action violate the American creed of freedom and liberty.⁹⁵

Many of the white graduates of racially diverse schools whom we interviewed definitely dabble in laissez-faire racism—and some embrace it more wholeheartedly than others. But they are also, we believe, more perplexed about the separateness and inequality that surrounds them because it is a structural feature of our society that is in contrast with some, but not all, of the lessons they learned about race in their public schools. Though they frequently buy into the color-blind argument and insist that neighborhoods are racially segregated mostly because blacks and Latinos want to be with their “own kind,” they are also more likely than whites with a racially segregated upbringing to at least explore complex questions and explanations of the current state of our racially divided society. School desegregation did fundamentally change them, they will tell you. Most say they are appreciative of the

souls of black (and brown) folks, they are less quick to blame black poverty on blacks' laziness or lack of responsibility, and they are more likely to see many positive dimensions of black culture. These insights, we believe, on the basis of our research and several recent quantitative studies that support our conclusions, are partly the result of their having glimpsed, even briefly, behind the veil of racial inequality and segregation.⁹⁶ They still share a white racial dualism, shifting and swaying between contradictory positions, and they no doubt benefit heartily from their white privilege, but in the end they are, as a whole, less comfortable with the most simple color-blind explanation: that all is well with our society and that "if those black folks would just work harder and have fewer babies, they could be well off like us."

WHY THE CLASS OF 1980?

For Americans born in the early 1960s—the group at the tail end of the baby boom and pre-Generation X—the civil rights movement is but a fuzzy memory of their childhood. It was something that began before them and was happening all around them when they were young children. They may have known that something significant had happened when Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in 1968, but they were too young to understand the struggle that preceded this event and how significant the formal dismantling of Jim Crow was at the time. Their impressions of this period of American history were shaped, no doubt, by their own racial identity and their parents' views of its importance or foolishness. But they were also shaped by their school experiences. And it is the class of 1980, more than any other cohort of students before or after them, that has looked at racial equality from both sides now—from experiences in both desegregated and more segregated contexts, from the pre-Reagan and the post-Reagan political eras—and that consequently has a unique vantage point from which to view our country's ongoing struggle with race.

In the fall of 1967, when Lyndon B. Johnson occupied the White House and Martin Luther King Jr. still lived, a new crop of kindergartners

entered public schools across the country. Full of the hope and promise that marked the era into which they were born, these children would travel through the educational system at a time of tremendous change. On their first day of school, the federal government was on the verge of finally forcing hundreds of school districts to implement the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Thirteen years later, they would graduate from public schools that were, on average, far more desegregated than those they had entered.

Thus we chose to study the history of six high schools and the members of the class of 1980 who attended them during the late 1970s because their era was the beginning of the peak years of school desegregation implementation in this country. By 1988, efforts by the Reagan administration to dismantle school desegregation policies had begun to pay off, and resegregation was on the rise.⁹⁷ National data show that members of the class of 1980, therefore, were on average more likely to have classmates of other races than were students in any class before them or in classes from the mid- to late 1980s onward.⁹⁸

Our research suggests that the late 1970s was a particularly pivotal moment in the history of school desegregation policy across the country. By this time in many towns the initial protests and racial conflict that had occurred when students were first reassigned to desegregated schools had subsided to some degree. According to many people we interviewed, the late seventies were a relatively sedate time when strong and vocal opposition to desegregation had died down. The promise of a new more racially integrated society was still alive, at least in school districts that had not already lost most of their white students.⁹⁹

Yet among people who, like the class of 1980 members we interviewed, had firsthand experience with desegregation, survey results show that this experience changed them. For instance, a 1978 survey of graduates of desegregated schools showed that 63 percent of blacks and 56 percent of whites said that their school desegregation experience had been "very satisfactory." Only 8 percent of blacks and 16 percent of whites said the experience was "unsatisfactory."¹⁰⁰

At the same time, as we noted above, the late 1970s was a transitional period, following Watergate and the Vietnam War. A conservative political

movement would soon change the policy agenda in education and other social welfare arenas. The class of 1980 graduated from high school in the middle of a crippling economic recession, an oil crisis that led to long lines at the gas pumps, and the humiliating and protracted Iranian hostage crisis. Ronald Reagan was about to be elected president and would launch a major assault on the public policies of the civil rights era, including school desegregation, that had helped black and Latinos gain access to education.¹⁰¹

Thus the class of 1980 came of age during the Reagan years. Over the twenty-five years following their high school graduation, many in this cohort sought jobs and a college education, married, bought homes, had children, met new friends, and joined new religious and social institutions. Meanwhile, the public schools gradually became more racially segregated, and little progress was made in reducing the level of segregation in housing and other realms of society.

Indeed, while many people in this society have been affected by the political shifts of the last three decades, the cohort that left high school in the spring of 1980 was especially vulnerable. These changes, coming at a very formative phase of their lives, caused them to later question many of the ideals they had come to believe in as they made their way through school. These shifting ideals are reflected in the annual survey of college freshmen conducted at UCLA, which found that the percentage of college freshmen who agreed that “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” was “essential or very important” declined from about 85 percent in 1967 to about 39 percent in 2003, with most of the decrease occurring after the 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, in the fall of 1980, about 60 percent of freshman agreed with this statement. Meanwhile, the percentage of freshmen who said that “being very well-off financially” was “essential or very important” increased from about 40 percent in 1967 to about 74 percent in 2003, with the major rise occurring from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s.¹⁰²

By the time they had become adults and were making difficult decisions about their own jobs, homes, and families, the political terrain had changed so dramatically that many were caught off guard. The year many in this cohort graduated from college, 1984, was declared by *Newsweek* magazine to be the “The Year of the Yuppie.” According to the

popular news magazine, the “young urban professionals have arrived” and are bent on making a lot of money, “spending it conspicuously, and switching political candidates like they test cuisines.”¹⁰³

Caught between their older siblings who had worn go-go boots or been flower children and the new era of materialism, consumerism, and individualism, members of the class of 1980 exhibit their own chronological double consciousness that transcends and intersects issues of race and equality. Thus many members of the class of 1980 carry with them the spirit of hope of the 1960s and 1970s—hope that inequality could be eliminated or greatly lessened in their lifetime. Many also carry with them valued experiences in racially desegregated schools. Yet they embarked on their adult lives in an era that rewarded those who focused more on themselves and their own accumulation of wealth than on the problems of others or the greater good.¹⁰⁴ This politically schizophrenic life span has contributed to the confusion and contradiction in the voices of the African American, Latino, and white graduates we have interviewed.

In this way, the double consciousness about race and politics expressed by class of 1980 graduates is symbolic of the political and social soul of this country and the many shifts and changes it has endured since the early sixties. Their collective sense of loss about the interracial experiences they had in high school and no longer have as adults mirrors a sense of longing that many Americans have for a time when there was less focus on individualism and material gain and more emphasis on people coming together across various boundaries and creating a more fair and just nation. At the same time, most of these graduates, like most Americans, find themselves embedded in a society that pushes them away from such values.

For all these reasons, we felt compelled to study racially mixed high schools in the late 1970s and the long-term effects of these school experiences on their graduates of the class of 1980. Those graduates recount powerful experiences of cross-racial friendships, racial inequality, and missed opportunities within their racially mixed schools and the larger society. It is time we hear their stories.