BLUE-CHIP BLACK

RACE, CLASS, AND STATUS
IN THE NEW BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

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Contents

Introduction

They're trying to be like the whites instead of being who they are," Andrea Creighton, a forty-three-year-old information analyst with the federal government, told me when I asked whether she believed blacks had made it in the United States or still had a long way to go. Andrea is black, and she perceives irrepressible distinctions between middle-class blacks and whites, even though many aspects of her life appear to reflect membership in the suburban middle-class mainstream. She and her husband, Greg, have two teenage children: a girl, age seventeen, and a boy, age fifteen. They have lived on a quiet street in Sherwood Park, an upper-middle-class suburb of Washington, D.C., for seven years. Their four-bedroom home is an imposing red-brick-front colonial with shiny black shutters, nestled on an acre of neatly manicured lawn. The children are active members of the local soccer team, and Greg is one of the team's coaches. Andrea and her husband each drive midsize cars and have provided their daughter, who is old enough to drive unaccompanied by an adult, with her own car. At first blush, they seem nearly identical to their white middle-class counterparts. But unlike the nearly all-white neighborhood that the average middle-class white family calls home, the Creightons' upscale subdivision is predominantly black. Andrea and Greg are pleased that their children are growing up in a com-

munity filled with black professionals. The Creightons' residence in Sherwood Park is one indication of the kind of social differentiation Andrea employs to define her identity as a member of the black middle class. Though she shares many lifestyle characteristics with mainstream whites, she feels that middle-class blacks are not mirror images of middle-class whites, nor should they aspire to be.

Middle-class, distinctly black suburban communities like Andrea's are rare in the United States, but Andrea's inclination to define middle-class blacks in relation to their white middle-class counterparts is not. Middle-class black and white families are assumed to be different, and an established body of evidence supports this perception, suggesting that racial disparities in key indicators of middle-class status—wealth, housing, and income—perpetuate glaring inequities between blacks and whites, even when the individuals occupy the same class.[1] But peering into Andrea's world reveals that some aspects of everyday life are similar for all middle-class people, regardless of race. That is, some middle-class blacks live in highly desirable neighborhoods, others have enrolled their children in exclusive private schools, still others work in predominantly white professional environments, and some have never had to endure economic hardship. The pool of class-based resources available to Andrea's family and others like hers suggest that there are two distinct groups of middle-class blacks in American society: the fragile black lower-middle class, a group that falls behind the white middle class on key measures of middle-class status; and the stable black middle class, a group that is virtually indistinguishable from its white counterpart on most standard economic indicators.[2]

Lower-middle-class blacks, the focus of most contemporary sociological studies on the black middle class, have very little in common with the white middle class. As a group, they typically earn less than fifty thousand dollars annually, do not hold college degrees, and are concentrated in sales or clerical positions rather than white-collar occupations. In this way, the black lower-middle class resembles the "blue-collar middle class" that emerged in Detroit as a direct result of the tremendous expansion of the auto industry.[3] Moreover, as recent ethnographies show, lower-middle-class blacks often live in racially segregated neighborhoods that are either inclusive of the black poor or contiguous with chronically poor black neighborhoods. Within these distressed black communities, lower-middle-class blacks typically live with high crime rates, poor municipal services, and underperforming schools. For these reasons, sociologist Mary Pattillo understandably characterizes the black

lower-middle class in her book *Black Picket Fences* as separate from and unequal to the white middle class.[4]

Without a doubt, the black middle class is bottom-heavy, and lower-middle-class blacks concentrated at the bottom of this class structure may find themselves clinging by a frayed thread to a fledgling middle-class status. As the data in table 1 show, in 2000, lower-middle class blacks (those who earned between $30,000 and $49,999 annually) made up the majority (65 percent) of the black middle class. At the same time, a completely different group of middle-class blacks exists, one whose socioeconomic circumstances more closely resemble the white middle class. Members of this second group of middle-class blacks work as doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, and corporate managers, occupations that require at least a bachelor's degree. These blacks, who earned more than $50,000 annually, made up 35 percent of the black middle class in 2000, and they are the focus of this book. In terms of sheer numbers, this group, composed of high-earning middle-class blacks, mirrors its white counterpart in the same income category, which constituted 47 percent of the white middle class in 2000.

Middle-class blacks at the top of the black class structure do not experience a middle-class lifestyle in the same way that those at the bottom do. The middle-class black subdivisions in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., that I studied do not contain poor residents, nor do these communities suffer from the relentless social and economic maladies that plague poor communities. In terms of occupational status, educational attainment, income, and housing, the top segment of the black middle class is equal to the white middle class. The key distinction between the white and black middle classes is thus a matter of degree. Middle-class whites fit the public image of the middle class and may therefore take their middle-class status for granted, but blacks who have "made it" must work harder, more deliberately, and more consistently to make their middle-class status known to others.

This book explores how different groups of middle-class blacks go about doing this work of fitting in by examining the symbolic boundaries they erect between themselves and white strangers, the white middle class, and blacks from other classes to establish and sustain a black middle-class identity. The book addresses the following questions: What distinct identities are constructed and maintained by the black middle class? How do different groups of middle-class blacks vary in their use of these identities? In terms of their access to cultural and

TABLE 1. GRADATIONS OF MIDDLE-CLASS INCOMES, 2000

Annual Income	Whites				Blacks			
	Percentage of Men	*Percentage of Women*	*Percentage of White Population*	*Percentage of White Middle-Class Population*	*Percentage of Men*	*Percentage of Women*	*Percentage of Black Population*	*Percentage of Black Middle-Class Population*
Lower-Middle-Class Incomes								
$30,000–$49,999	24	16	20	53	20	15	17	65
Middle-Class Incomes								
$50,000–$99,999	19	8	14	37	12	6	8	31
Upper-Middle-Class Incomes								
$100,000 and above	6	1	4	10	1.5	0.5	1	4

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (PINC-02, Part 25 and Part 49).

economic resources, are middle and upper-class blacks more like their white counterparts than they are like lower-class blacks?

To understand the different types of social identity that middle-class blacks construct and how they vary among individuals and across contexts, I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty black middle-class couples and complemented these interviews with participant observation in three different middle-class suburban communities. I spent time doing the things that residents of these communities do in their everyday lives: attending church, Parent-Teacher Association meetings, homeowner association meetings, block parties, and political meetings. The first community, Lakeview, is a majority-white middle-class suburban tract in predominantly white Fairfax County, Virginia. In 1990, Lakeview was 4 percent black, 31 percent of its residents were professionals, 44 percent had bachelor's or more advanced degrees, the median family income was $78,907, and the median monthly mortgage payment was $1,242. The second community, Riverton, is a predominantly black suburban tract in mostly black Prince George's County, Maryland. In 1990, Riverton was 65 percent black, 21 percent of its residents were professionals, 23 percent had bachelor's or more advanced degrees, the median family income was $66,144, and the median monthly mortgage payment was $1,212. The third community, Sherwood Park, is a majority-black upper-middle-class suburban community located within Riverton. This exclusive ten-year-old subdivision is 85 percent black, 90 percent of its residents are college-educated professionals, the median family income is $117,000, and the median monthly mortgage payment is $2,128. The mean individual income for the entire sample is $72,000. Riverton respondents separate Sherwood Park from the other Riverton subdivisions; therefore, I report my findings in the context of three suburban communities rather than two.

Most of *Blue-Chip Black* focuses on differences by residential location in how middle-class blacks think about and make use of their social identities. Whereas middle-class blacks from all three suburban communities characterize their encounters with white strangers in public settings and their strategies for managing these interactions similarly, in other contexts their conceptions of what it means to be black and middle class vary widely, from perceptions of economic stability, to the optimal way to prepare black children to traverse the color line, to attitudes about the collective interests of their respective communities.

STUDYING SOCIAL IDENTITIES IN BLACK COMMUNITIES

In recent years, scholars have published a number of informative community-based studies that examine the life experiences of the black middle class, marking the end of a long period of inattention to this group. However, this is the first study to focus specifically on the set of distinct identities that different groups of middle-class blacks construct and use in their everyday lives in both the public sphere and their suburban communities. Scholars who have conducted ethnographic studies of black communities have done a great deal to fill enormous gaps in our understanding of how middle-class blacks conceive of their place in American society since Frazier's scathing indictment of the group in the 1957 classic *Black Bourgeoisie* and Bart Landry's notable study of the growth and culture of the black middle class published in 1987. The ethnographers Stephen Gregory, Mary Pattillo, John Jackson, Monique Taylor, and Bruce Haynes have all focused attention on the complex ways in which middle-class blacks manage their lives in black neighborhoods. However, their studies present the black middle class as if the group is undifferentiated, that is to say, composed of people who think similarly about their place in American society relative to other groups above and below them on the class ladder.

One limitation of these existing ethnographic studies of the black middle class is that each focuses on a single black community, one that is not uniformly middle class but inclusive of the black working class and, in some cases, the black poor. These case studies are mainly concerned with how a distressed black community context shapes the lives of its middle-class residents. As the studies demonstrate, because their samples of middle-class blacks share community space with lower-class blacks, the middle-class population define their identities primarily in relation to the black lower classes. But a single-site research design does not shed light on how the identities constructed by different groups of middle-class blacks vary according to the specificities of their distinct community context. The present study's multi-site design contrasts three suburban communities that vary in terms of their racial and class composition. Indeed, by focusing on three middle-class communities where poor blacks are not present, I show that difference in residence has a significant effect on how middle-class blacks perceive themselves and others. This methodological contribution sets *Blue-Chip Black* apart from existing studies of the black middle class.

A second limitation of recent ethnographic studies of the black mid-

dle class is that not a single work focuses on a southern community. This is surprising given the growing economic and social importance of the South. Demographers note that "an unusually robust economy" in the Southeast accounts for a significant chunk of the country's economic growth during the 1990s. Industries such as manufacturing that experienced declines in the United States overall grew and in some cases expanded in the Southeast. Other industries that grew slowly in the United States overall, such as services, expanded rapidly in the Southeast. Strong economic growth in the region has contributed to a return migration already in progress. Both the white and black populations are increasing in the South.[5] The promise of steady employment has also lured Latino immigrants to the South in large numbers. Mary Waters and Tomas Jimenez refer to southern cities in states such as North Carolina and Georgia (in which the immigrant population has grown by 273.7 percent and 233.4 percent respectively) as "gateway cities," new ports of first-time entry for immigrants.[6] Defined for so long by the black-white boundary, the Southeast is well on its way to becoming one of the most multiracial regions of the country. Through its attention to the impact of a southern black community context on identity, this study provides a point of comparison for existing studies of northern black communities and contributes to the growing dialogue on the increasing importance of the South.

A third limitation of studies focused on the black middle class is that they fail to address variations among middle-class black *parents* in terms of how they socialize their children. Scholars have not paid sufficient attention to variations among middle-class black parents, who are concerned not only with negotiating their own social identities but also with nurturing a black middle class identity among their children. The ways in which parents accomplish this goal are conspicuously absent from the sociological literature. In their revealing glimpses into the lives of lower-middle-class and poor blacks, Mary Pattillo and Elijah Anderson document the grave concerns of black parents who face formidable obstacles in their efforts to raise upstanding citizens. Yet the parents' escalating fears are specific to the demands of their distressed urban neighborhoods; they do not reflect the concerns of more privileged, suburban, middle-class blacks.

Annette Lareau's sensitively rendered ethnographic exploration of how black and white parents from different class locations communicate class position to their children makes abundantly clear the hidden processes through which black children acquire a middle-class identity;

however, her study does not reveal significant differences in parenting ideologies across race. Lareau finds that black and white middle-class parents adopt the same type of cultural logic as a framework for raising their children. She writes of an upper-middle-class black child in her sample:

> The fact that Alexander is a young African American male also shaped various aspects of his life in important ways. He belonged to an all-Black church, and he had regular opportunities to form friendships with other Black children. His parents carefully scrutinized his social environment, always seeking, as [his mother] said, to keep him in the company of individuals who were also "cultured." . . . [His parents] were well aware of the potential for Alexander to be exposed to racial injustice, and they went to great lengths to protect their son from racial insults and other forms of discrimination. Nevertheless, race did not appear to shape the dominant cultural logic of child rearing in Alexander's family or in other families in the study.[7]

Because Lareau did not set out to investigate attitudes about racial identity or racial socialization (she was interested instead in the transmission and reproduction of class), it would be useful to explore whether a different sample of middle-class blacks shows patterns of class socialization that are racially coded.

These rich ethnographic studies depict the considerable challenges parents face while raising children, yet they fail to capture how much work it is for middle-class black parents to help their children remember that they are black, even as they seek to provide them with the advantages they would receive if they were white and middle-class. Researchers have not looked enough at the ways that mothers and fathers help to construct a black middle-class identity through deliberate work. This study explores parents' efforts and demonstrates that different groups of middle-class blacks may conceive of this process in different ways.

UNDERSTANDING BLACK IDENTITIES

Three theoretical concepts are central to understanding how middle-class blacks think about their identities: boundary-work, the tool kit model, and construction sites. Each of these concepts helps us to work through the confusion and conflict around the notions of "making it" and "being black."

BOUNDARY-WORK AND ASSIMILATION

It is now commonly understood that identities are socially constructed through groups' interactions with one another. The theoretical framework finds its intellectual antecedent in the work of anthropologist Fredrik Barth, who used the term *boundaries* rather than the more specialized term *boundary-work*. Barth laid the foundation for this type of sociological analysis in a stimulating volume titled *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*.[8] Drawing on the experiences of European ethnic groups, Barth argued that ethnic groups define who they are by erecting and defending boundaries between themselves and outsiders.

According to Barth, a group's ethnic identity emerges not from the group's *isolation* from other cultures, as traditional anthropological models had claimed, but from ongoing *contact* with different cultures, interactions in which groups are motivated to define themselves in contradistinction to newcomers. "Boundaries persist," he wrote, "despite a flow of personnel between them. . . . Ethnic distinctions do not depend on the absence of social interaction and acceptance, but . . . do entail processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained *despite* changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories."[9] I argue that the ethnic boundaries model can be applied to middle-class blacks born in the United States. Whom middle-class blacks come into contact with informs the racial boundaries they construct and negotiate. In the post-segregation era, middle-class blacks interact routinely with whites—at work, in integrated neighborhoods, and in public spaces. At the same time, middle-class blacks must also think about managing their interactions with blacks from the lower classes. Like those of Barth's European ethnics, these interactions with other racial and class groupings shape middle-class blacks' conceptions of who they are.

But Barth's key insight was that members of the same ethnic group may think differently about how to nurture and sustain their ethnic identity. These differences stem from members' regional locations, he argued. Studying the Pathan ethnic group, some of whom live in Afghanistan and others farther south in West Pakistan, Barth discovered that the Pathans draw boundaries between themselves and others on the basis of *virtue* as manifested in three institutions: hospitality, the council, and seclusion. Hospitality involves entertaining guests lavishly, regardless of the guests' social stature; in doing so, the Pathan demonstrate their moral rectitude.

The council is charged with negotiating disputes in a way that reflects core Pathan values of egalitarianism and unanimity. Seclusion refers to the practice of celebrating sexuality, dominance, and patriarchy in the shadows of the public sphere before an all-male audience, rather than valorizing masculinity in the public sphere. These virtues constitute the basis for boundary drawing among the Pathan, a way for them to distinguish their ethnic group from others; however, this set of virtues is more useful in some regions of the country than in others. As a result, the salience of Pathan identity waxes and wanes with the location and organizational structure of the group's villages. Barth demonstrated convincingly that regional location affects how the Pathan think of themselves in ethnic terms, but he was not concerned with documenting the considerable effort that individual Pathans put forth on a daily basis to manage their ethnic identity or what it meant to them to have to do it in the first place.

To date, only a handful of studies have explored within-group variation in identity. An early work by the sociologist Michele Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners,* explores these boundary-drawing processes among upper-middle-class white men in the United States and France. What she finds is that both American and French men want to distinguish their group from the lower classes but engage in different types of boundary-work to do so. Americans define themselves in contradistinction to the lower classes based on moral boundaries (assessments as to who is honest, hardworking, and ethical) and socioeconomic boundaries (indicators of social position, including wealth, occupational authority, and occupational status). American upper-middle-class men are less likely than the French, she argues, to exclude others based on cultural boundaries (as measured by educational attainment, tastes, and mastery of high culture).[10] Digging deeper into the sources of internal variation, Lamont compares all of the men according to occupational type (cultural specialist or social specialist) and industry (for-profit or nonprofit sector). The original pattern holds. American men rely more on socioeconomic boundaries to distinguish their group from the lower classes, whether they are cultural or social specialists and whether they work in the private or public sector. Similarly, French men employ cultural boundaries to do this work, regardless of their occupational type or industry type.

Do upper-middle-class black American men use socioeconomic boundaries to distinguish their group from others as their white counterparts do? A key weakness of Lamont's work is her failure to study

upper-middle-class black men, especially since she draws direct compar-isons between upper-middle-class and lower-middle-class men in a sec-ond pivotal study, *The Dignity of Working Men*. Drawing on interviews with both black and white working-class men, Lamont shows that in con-trast to upper-middle-class men, both groups reject traditional economic indicators, relying instead on moral boundaries to raise their status rela-tive to the upper classes. This finding raises questions as to whether the boundary-work of upper-middle-class American blacks would more closely resemble that of upper-middle-class American white men (who are motivated to draw both socioeconomic and moral boundaries) or lower-middle-class black men (who draw moral boundaries exclusively).

Blue-Chip Black also answers the call put forth by Lamont for em-pirical studies that explore the boundary-work carried out by upper-middle-class blacks.[11] Operating from the premise that the boundaries drawn by members of the upper-middle class "are likely to be more per-manent, less crossable, and less resisted than the boundaries that exist be-tween ethnic groups," Lamont implies, though she does not state di-rectly, that upper-middle-class blacks and whites may be more similar than are upper-middle-class and lower-class blacks.[12] If this were true, it would mean that upper-middle-class blacks would, like their white upper-middle-class counterparts, use moral boundaries to buttress their already confident hold on a higher social standing. In American society, where pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps is valorized and free-loaders are looked down upon, the white men in Lamont's study use moral criteria to underscore the idea that their success is the result of their hard work and that they have played the American game and come out ahead. The perception that successful people are those who clawed their way to the front of the pack is critical, especially since parents' sta-tus position has implications for their children's well-being, as Lamont points out:

> Competition permeates everything in the American upper-middle class world. It even permeates the world of children; parents often make consid-erable financial sacrifices and efforts to have their children admitted to the "best schools," not only at the college level but at the elementary and high school levels as well. . . . [One informant said of the upper-middle class,] "They are all successful people. If the kids don't do well somehow, that's a reflection on them and somewhat detracts from themselves. So therefore their kids must be good, and they see to it."[13]

If it were true that upper-middle-class blacks and whites are more sim-ilar than upper-middle- and lower-class blacks, it would also mean that

socioeconomic criteria shape the boundary-work of upper-middle-class black men just as they do that of upper-middle-class white men. Take money, for example. Money matters to upper-middle-class white men not merely for its accumulated value, but also for its symbolic value, because "money means above all freedom, control, and security, these being clearly circumscribed by level of personal income." Demonstrating one's success through visible measures of comfort and upper-middle-class living is a defining feature in the lives of upper-middle-class white men. This measure includes the usual suspects—material items such as an imposing home, luxury cars, and exotic vacations. But it also includes "the kids' ballet classes and piano lessons, and their tennis and computer camps, as well as the time spent at work vs. the time the adults spend golfing or enjoying other leisure-time activities." Membership in exclusive clubs is another way that the upper-middle-class white men in Lamont's study communicate their status position. Such membership "provides information on socioeconomic status to the extent that it signals the fact that one has achieved a certain income level, that one is committed to its accompanying lifestyle, and that one has been accepted by the 'right kinds of people.' "[14]

The idea that some class boundaries within the black community may be more impermeable than those between blacks and whites is not a new one. In *Unequal Childhoods,* sociologist Annette Lareau writes of the patterns of class transmission she found among her middle-class informants: "Middle class black and white children in my study did exhibit some key differences, yet the biggest gaps were not within social classes but . . . across them."[15] And long before Lamont and Lareau, William J. Wilson launched the race-class debate when he posited that the widening gulf between the black lower class, a group with little opportunity for upward mobility, and the black middle class, a group that has expanded enormously due largely to civil rights legislation, means that the lives of middle-class blacks are more similar to the white middle class than to those of the black lower classes.[16] So the idea is not new, but this is the first book to explore how different groups of middle-class blacks conceive of their status position and define themselves relative to whites and lower-class blacks across a number of distinct settings. I show that to fully understand this process, we need to examine the boundary-work of the black upper-middle class apart from that of the black middle class. In doing so, we begin to develop a new language to talk about class, one that speaks to differentiation within the black middle class.

To my knowledge, only one previous study investigates variations in

how different groups of middle-class blacks conceive of their identity. Studying black executives in a large Philadelphia corporation, sociologist Elijah Anderson showed that the black workers can be classified according to two distinct identity formations: "the own" and "the wise." The "own" occupy positions low on the corporate hierarchy, are less integrated into the corporate culture, and are defined by their skin color and belief in racial unity. The "wise" hold "positions of authority and influence" in the company, have internalized the corporate culture, and function as supportive mentors to the "own."[17] Anderson's study is instructive because he shows that not all middle-class blacks conceive of their identity in the same way. However, because his study is limited to the workplace, we don't know whether the differentiation he found is transferable to other public settings frequented by middle-class blacks.

THE BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS TOOL KIT

The tool kit model draws attention to the material and nonmaterial forms of culture that help people to negotiate everyday life and to make sense of the actions of others. Material culture refers to the physical objects that people create and assign meaning to. A college diploma, for example, signifies an important credential to employers and helps them to sort out applicants by their level of training. Nonmaterial culture consists of the more abstract cultural objects that people create, from ideas to rituals to ceremonies. A bar mitzvah ceremony, for example, represents a sacred rite of passage for a young Jewish boy. Sociologists refer to these cultural forms—including the college diploma and the bar mitzvah—as symbols because they have a meaning that is more complex than their original function suggests. They represent the ways in which cultural meaning is transmitted and stored. We draw on these meanings in our everyday lives as the need arises. Taken together, these various symbols constitute a cultural repertoire, a set of cultural materials standing at the ready whenever we want or need to make use of them.[18] According to Ann Swidler:

> [It is] best to think of culture as a repertoire, like that of an actor, a musician, or a dancer. This image suggests that culture cultivates skills and habits in its users, so that one can be more or less good at the cultural repertoire one performs, and that such cultured capacities may exist both as discrete skills, habits and orientations, and, in larger assemblages, like the pieces a musician has mastered or the plays an actor has performed. It is in this sense that people have an array of cultural resources upon which they can draw. We can ask not only what pieces are in the repertoire but why some are performed at one time, some at another.[19]

Evidence suggests that blacks and whites not only engage different elements of the cultural tool kit, they draw from different types of tool kits altogether. From Mary Pattillo's study of a black neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, we learn that black people access a distinctly black cultural tool kit, composed of church rituals such as prayer, call-and-response, and religious material objects, which are put to use in public community meetings as an effective way to mobilize the neighborhood's residents. These church rituals are so pervasive in the black community that they are understood even by blacks who are not regular churchgoers. Pattillo concludes that this specific strategy of employing religious tools in secular settings is a distinguishing feature of civic life in black Chicago. She argues that political meetings and events held in comparable white Chicago communities do not incorporate prayer, testimony, or other church rituals as black civic events do.[20] I build on Pattillo's finding by showing that the racially distinct black cultural tool kit is further distinguished by social class.

Just as blacks in Chicago engage a tool kit in which cultural content and meaning are not dispersed beyond the boundaries of the black world, the middle-class blacks in this study access a tool kit reflective of the black middle-class experience. My focus here is strictly on the social identities that make up the black middle-class tool kit, not the many other cultural symbols that may be relevant to the black middle-class experience. The black middle-class tool kit is composed of public identities, status-based identities, racial and class-based identities, and suburban identities. Middle-class blacks employ these identities instrumentally to establish their position in American society relative to white strangers, their white middle-class neighbors, lower-class blacks, and one another. In public settings, where they are likely to encounter white strangers who are not automatically aware of their class position, middle-class blacks assert public identities in order to manage these interactions effectively, to demonstrate their middle-class status, and to ensure a carefree outing. A key strategy involves differentiating their group from lower-class blacks and amplifying similarities with the white middle class. The groups of blacks in this study do not vary in their use of public identities. Public identities are necessary in a racialized society and will remain necessary so long as the public perception of who is middle-class in the United States does not include black people. Status-based identities are critical to the intergenerational reproduction of a middle-class status. Middle-class blacks differ by economic status in their perceptions of how to transmit or reproduce their social status. These status differences give

rise to two different groups of middle-class blacks, the elite black middle class and the core black middle class. The last three identities housed in the black middle class tool kit emerge from middle-class blacks' interactions with others in their suburban settings. Racial identities reflect parents' perceptions about how best to prepare their children for the white world while maintaining connections to other blacks. Parents living in predominantly white suburbs think differently about this process than do parents living in majority-black suburban communities. Class-based identities reflect the tension between hip hop culture and the middle-class culture parents hope to socialize their children into. Suburban identities capture the community issues that facilitate alliances between middle-class blacks and their white neighbors. The set of identities housed in the black middle-class tool kit should be incorporated into our definition of what it means to be black and middle-class along with standard indicators such as income, occupation, education, and home ownership.

It is possible that the social identities I describe and connect to middle-class blacks may resonate with other groups as well. Latinos are slated to overtake blacks as the largest minority group in the United States by 2050. As reports of increasing discrimination directed toward Latinos come to light, researchers may find that the model that I've outlined also reflects the Latino experience in the United States. Similarly, I suspect lower-class blacks also possess a host of social identities reflective of their class position and lifestyle. But because my sample includes neither Latinos or lower-class blacks, I limit my discussion to the black middle class and leave it to other social scientists to test the model among other racial, ethnic, or class groupings.

CONSTRUCTION SITES AND BLACK IDENTITIES

Ascribed and achieved characteristics like race and class aren't the only factors that determine which identities middle-class blacks pluck from their tool kit. People tend to think of the construction of social identities primarily in terms of individual characteristics (e.g., class, gender, age, race), but in my view, this perspective is incomplete. There is compelling evidence that the neighborhood context can also have a profound influence on the formation of a sense of who one is as a middle-class black person. Context matters greatly because it affects the situations that middle-class blacks are likely to confront and the strategies they use to deal with such situations. In neighborhoods, the social organization of

the community helps to determine what boundaries are drawn and under what circumstances. For example, in the lower-middle-class black neighborhood depicted in Mary Pattillo's Chicago study, black residents are ambivalent about drawing rigid boundaries against social deviants such as drug dealers because they, too, are well-known members of the general community.[21]

Neighborhoods and other arenas where identities are negotiated over and over again by individuals are what sociologists Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann term "construction sites."[22] Within these settings, people establish criteria that serve as the basis for establishing boundaries. Among the same individuals, these criteria may vary from one setting to another.[23] This makes perfect sense given that the roles that individuals play change as they move from one setting to another. A surgeon is simply a mother or father on returning home to the family at the end of the workday. Other types of identities are also context-specific. Through her study of the play patterns of children attending an elementary school, Barrie Thorne determined that gender is an identity that waxes and wanes; it is salient in some situations but discounted in others.[24] She writes, "A 'boy' will always be a 'boy' and that fact will enter all his experiences. But in some interactions, he may be much more aware of that strand of his identity than in others, just as his ethnicity or age may be more relevant in some situations than others." We know this intuitively, but few studies have been attentive to variability in actions of the same individuals across a variety of different contexts or "construction sites." No ethnographic treatment of the black middle class has contrasted different types of middle-class black communities in the same study.

Sociologists Joe Feagin and Melvin Sikes conducted interviews with more than 200 middle-class blacks in their exhaustive investigation of how middle-class blacks manage their identities in a variety of contexts, from the workplace to colleges to neighborhoods to public recreational and social settings. But because the authors do not trace the experience of the same individuals across these different settings, the study cannot determine whether their informants' racial identities matter more in some contexts than in others.[25] We are left with the impression that the only reason middle-class blacks care so much about a racial identity is that they have to defend themselves against racism at every turn. Negotiating racism is important, but the middle-class blacks in this study are invested in their racial identities for another equally important reason: they enjoy interacting with other blacks.

Scholars have focused so much on the burden of blackness that they have devoted scant attention to the possibility that there is something enjoyable about being black and participating in a community of blacks.

To identify the conditions under which a black racial identity is an advantage or a liability, I draw a distinction between public and private construction sites. The public spaces presented here include shopping centers, the workplace, and the housing market in the greater Washington, D.C., metropolitan area—construction sites that figure most centrally in the everyday lives of the black middle class. Identity construction processes in public spaces differ according to blacks' familiarity with the whites they encounter in these settings. By contrast, in their suburban communities, middle-class blacks' white neighbors know a great deal about them—where they work, where they vacation, where they shop, and their general status in the community. Moreover, suburban blacks in Lakeview, Riverton, and Sherwood Park share a common class background with their white neighbors. But in public spaces, middle-class blacks meet up with unfamiliar whites who do not know them well, and they therefore must develop strategies to manage racial stigmatization in the public sphere, should they encounter it. By exploring the identity work of the same people across a variety of different settings, I demonstrate (just as Barrie Thorne did in her analysis of gender) that the salience of black racial identity varies from one context to another.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The first two chapters lay the foundation for a discussion of variation in the identity options of middle-class black suburbanites. Chapter 1 discusses the literature on black middle-class identity. I review how the group has been operationalized in previous studies and explain why this definition is inadequate.

Chapter 2 establishes the role that suburban developers play in orchestrating community life. Through the rules and regulations that they attached to homeowners' deeds, developers in Lakeview, Riverton, and Sherwood Park imposed a set of core values on suburban residents, a practice that distinguishes Washington's suburbs from the District, where, in the absence of developers, residents themselves assume responsibility for determining the community's personality. Differences in developers' visions of what constitutes an ideal middle-class suburban lifestyle resulted in diverse suburban communities that house different

groups of middle-class blacks and structure their social identities in different ways.

The remaining chapters present each of the social identities stored in the black middle class tool kit and, with the exception of chapter 3, outline how different groups of middle-class blacks choose from these identities. Chapter 3 explores an under-studied component of racial stigma theory: the degree to which middle-class blacks resort to signaling their class position, the use of what I call *public identities,* as a legitimate strategy for negotiating racial discrimination in three sectors of the public sphere: the marketplace, the workplace, and while house-hunting. I challenge the prevailing view, in which middle-class blacks' tendency to successfully play up their middle-class status is discounted. Indeed, the middle-class blacks in this study believe that they get what they want—a trouble-free shopping experience, loyalty from white subordinates, and access to homes put up for sale—when they demonstrate to whites that they are truly members of the middle class. Scholars need to look more at the identity strategies of the same individuals across contexts that are shared by all members of the black middle classes.

Chapter 4 examines how perceptions of economic stability shape the status identities that middle-class blacks assert. Blacks in Lakeview, Riverton, and Sherwood Park are all concerned about actively maintaining their status position relative to other groups, but they go about this process differently. Sherwood Park blacks view their economic circumstances as stable and secure; therefore, they think about their status in the context of status reproduction, spending responsibly on themselves and lavishly on their children as a way of preparing them to replicate their parents' lifestyle for themselves as adults. Riverton and Lakeview blacks report feeling financially burdened; thus, they think about their status in terms of protecting what they have, leading them to spend responsibly on themselves and conservatively on their children. Based on these lifestyle differences, I characterize Sherwood Park blacks as members of the elite black middle class and Riverton and Lakeview blacks as members of the core black middle class. In summary, this chapter shows that the identities of middle-class blacks vary according to economic status.

In the next two chapters, I turn to the identity negotiation strategies employed by middle-class blacks within their suburban communities, contrasting the experience of living in a predominantly white suburb with that of living in a majority-black community. Chapter 5 establishes the missing link between an affinity for black spaces and the alternative assimilation trajectories of middle-class blacks. Although the middle-

class blacks in this study routinely travel back and forth across black-white boundaries, they are nevertheless concerned with nurturing meaningful connections to the black world. Blacks in both majority-white Lakeview and predominantly black Riverton perceive the black world as an important site for the construction of black racial identities, but residential location leads them to privilege different segments of the black world. In Riverton, black families are not unusual; therefore, Riverton residents rely on their black subdivision—a geographical community—to suture a black racial identity. By contrast, in Lakeview, a black family is often the only black presence in the community; therefore, Lakeview residents report taking additional steps, relying on black social organizations—an ideological community—to accomplish the same goal. In short, middle-class blacks rely on the black world as an important site for socializing, even if they live in a white suburb, a selective pattern of assimilation which I term *strategic assimilation*. Identity studies should direct more attention to variation in how middle-class blacks sustain racial identities.

Chapter 6 reveals variation in the construction of suburban identities by outlining the conditions under which black and white suburbanites in Prince George's County and Fairfax County form alliances on the basis of shared interests. In majority-black Prince George's County, where Riverton and Sherwood Park residents grapple with an inadequate tax base, a troubled school system, and the imminent threat of a large-scale tourist development, suburban identities are constructed on the basis of residential location. Black and white residents in upscale Sherwood Park avoid the public schools (with the exception of special magnet programs) and generally support the controversial tourist development, National Harbor, since they live far enough away from the site to avoid being affected by the introduction of stadium lighting and the projected increase in traffic, noise, and pollution. By contrast, black and white Riverton residents desire to improve the public school system from within and vehemently object to National Harbor. Indeed, many Riverton residents will lose their homes if the county carries out its plan to improve access to National Harbor by expanding a residential street to four lanes from two. In predominantly white Lakeview, suburban identities are constructed on the basis of age cohorts. Older residents are resistant to development and neighborhood improvement projects, while younger residents tend to support these changes.

The conclusion revisits the black middle-class tool kit, explaining why it is a better theoretical framework for understanding the identity op-

tions of the black middle classes than other approaches. Analyzing middle-class blacks' reliance on the tool kit shows that while there are important differences between middle-class whites and blacks, there are also real and meaningful divisions within the black middle class itself between the elite black middle class and the core black middle class.