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The Iconic Ghetto

By
ELIJAH ANDERSON

In the minds of many Americans, the ghetto is where “the black people live,” symbolizing an impoverished, crime-prone, drug-infested, and violent area of the city. Aided by the mass media and popular culture, this image of the ghetto has achieved an iconic status, and serves as a powerful source of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination. The history of racism in America, along with the ascription of “ghetto” to anonymous blacks, has burdened blacks with a negative presumption they must disprove before they can establish mutually trusting relationships with others. The poorest blacks occupy a caste-like status, and for the black middle class, contradictions and dilemmas of status are common, underscoring the racial divide and exacerbating racial tensions.

Keywords: black ghetto; race; race relations; urban ethnography; urban sociology; master status; provisional status

Several years ago, I vacationed in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, a pleasant Cape Cod town full of upper-middle-class white vacationers, tourists, and working-class white residents. During the two weeks that my family and I spent there, I encountered very few other black people. We had rented a beautiful cottage about a mile from the town center, which consisted of a library, a few restaurants, and stores catering to tourists. Early one weekday morning, I jogged down the road from our cottage through the town center and made my way to Route 6, which runs the length of the Cape from the Sagamore Bridge to Provincetown. It was a beautiful morning, about 75 degrees with low humidity and clear blue skies. I had jogged here many times before. At 6 a.m., the road was deserted, with only an occasional passing car. I was enjoying my run that morning, listening

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to the nature sounds and feeling a sense of serenity. It seemed I had this world all to myself.

Suddenly a red pickup truck appeared and stopped dead in the middle of the road. I looked over at the driver, a middle-aged white man, who was obviously trying to communicate something to me. He was waving his hands and gesticulating, and I immediately thought he might be in distress or in need of help, but I could not make out what he was saying. I stopped, cupped my hand to my ear to hear him better, and yelled back, "What did you say?" It was then that he made himself very clear. "Go home! Go home!" he yelled, dragging out the words to make sure I understood. I felt provoked, but I waved him off and continued on my way.

This incident not only spoiled my morning jog but nagged me for the rest of the day. Days afterward, I shared it with friends, black and white. Many of the blacks recounted their own similar tales. But who was this man? What was his problem? Was the incident merely a fluke? Did many other white people here feel similarly? And exactly what did he mean by "go home"? Did he assume, because of my black skin, that I was from the ghetto? These questions remained with me, and over the years have inspired my thinking about what I have come to call the iconic ghetto (see Anderson 2011, 2012).

The Ghetto in Social-Historical Perspective

African American ghettos, like Jewish ghettos in Europe, began in residential segregation (Wirth 1928; Hutchinson and Haynes 2012). For contemporary Americans, both black and white, the word *ghetto* has generally come to be associated with inner-city neighborhoods where poor black people live. It refers powerfully to the neighborhoods in which blacks have been concentrated; in popular parlance, it is "the black side of town," or "the 'hood." Over time, through ethnic and racial residential succession, ghetto areas expand and contract. As they threaten to engulf nearby neighborhoods, economically better-off whites and others tend to flee. Alternatively, gentrifying neighborhoods on the edge of the ghetto may draw well-off whites and others (Anderson 1990).

For both blacks and whites, the term *ghetto* is almost always pejorative. Outsiders typically have little direct experience with the ghetto; they gain their perspective from the media, from tales shared by friends, from fleeting glimpses of the ghetto's inhabitants downtown, or, in some cases, from having been threatened by residential racial succession themselves, with their own neighborhoods moving toward becoming ghettos. Accordingly, they imagine the ghetto as impoverished, chaotic, lawless, drug-infested, and ruled by violence. Like most stereotypes, this image contains elements of truth, but it is for the most part false.

In northern as well as southern cities, although black people initially lived near the elite whites whom they served, the conjoined processes of racial segregation and black community formation led to the concentration of black city-dwellers in

specific neighborhoods even before Emancipation. As black people migrated from the rural South to southern and northern cities after the end of Reconstruction, they joined those expanding enclaves. By the early twentieth century, blacks and recent immigrants were consigned to dilapidated neighborhoods near the urban core, and working-class whites were moving to the inner suburbs, facilitated first by mass transit and later by highway construction and the expansion of car ownership.

As black residential areas continued to expand, whites moved away. The cycle of block-busting, white flight, neighborhood succession, and red-lining that became notorious in the 1960s was already at work at the end of World War II (Sugrue 1996; Massey and Denton 1993). From the point of view of many whites, black people were to be contained in the ghetto. Blacks responded by creating myriad class-mixed social and religious institutions and a vibrant cultural life, and found acceptance and security there that to some degree countered the hostile discrimination they faced outside their community. A uniquely American style of racial segregation, even apartheid, developed that not only relegated African Americans to second-class citizenship but also confined them to delimited, ghettoized spaces in the city.

Contemporary Complexities of Race and Class Status

Through the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, blacks, along with progressive whites, struggled to transform the structures that subjugated African Americans. As the civil rights movement culminated in urban uprisings and conflagrations in ghettos across the country, the term *ghetto* became synonymous with militancy and violence. So fearsome was this phenomenon that the committee appointed to investigate its causes and suggest solutions was called the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission 1968). The public image of the ghetto as a powder keg packed with anger just waiting to explode in looting and burning was powerfully underscored in 1992, when riots were ignited in Los Angeles by the acquittal of the police officers charged in the beating of Rodney King. In more recent times, broadcast and print media consistently reinforce the notion of the black ghetto as a chaotic place where crime and mayhem are common.

In the 1960s, massive police power was applied to quell unrest, and many ghetto residents were killed or injured and many more left homeless. The War on Poverty, which initially was an effort to cool out these riots, soon degenerated into a war on the poor (Gans 1996). At the same time, a racial incorporation process that began in response to the civil rights movement allowed a relatively large proportion of blacks to escape the ghetto and move into the middle class. Educational opportunities for all blacks dramatically expanded. Fair housing legislation enabled affluent black families to relocate to the suburbs, as their white counterparts had done before them. Fair employment practices and laws

expanded the range of occupations open to black job-seekers, with affirmative action programs being the most consequential. The primary rationale for these new employment policies was that the underrepresentation of African Americans in professional and managerial positions was due chiefly to pervasive and entrenched patterns of racial discrimination; the integration of neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces was supposed to overcome the legacies of the past and ensure more equal opportunities in the future.

Recently, I observed an interaction at my local gym that to some might suggest that “fair housing” and labor laws and policies are succeeding in their mission and that, at least in some middle-class settings, race relations are improving. Early one morning, I was exercising in a fitness center in Andorra, a suburban neighborhood of Philadelphia that is located near several black working-class and poor neighborhoods. Engaged in my regular routine, I noticed an overweight white fellow in his mid-40s being instructed by an extremely well-built, dark skinned black man in his early 30s. The scene was a study in contrasts, as the white man nervously took instruction from the relatively young black man, who, by appearance alone, would ordinarily be associated with the ghetto. The white man attempted to do crunches, lying on his back, his head on the floor. The black man carefully coached him: “Now, ease up. You can do it! Careful with your neck, now! Come on, you can do it.” At first the white man seemed apprehensive, his eyes darting around the fitness center, but he was an attentive student and gradually loosened up, with the black man firmly controlling the situation.

Between reps, I overheard the two men engage in small talk as they exchanged intermittent smiles. Their words were few, as their attention remained focused on the white man’s athletic performance. The black man was always the instructor, determined to get this rotund man into shape and on the road to better health. The two men’s skin colors seemed irrelevant to this project. As the white man struggled to complete the goal of ten crunches that the instructor had set, the black man encouraged and even pleaded with him to reach the goal. When he finally made it, both broke into smiles of triumph and self-congratulation. Both of the men and also the other gym users who observed them seemed to treat the men’s joint activity as ordinary. Yet this apparent ordinariness is precisely what makes it significant. If such situations were more common, we might plausibly believe that race prejudice is dissipating. The poignant fact that the sort of interaction I observed in the gym is so rare underlines the fact that our society is far from colorblind.

In the past, the black stranger presenting himself in a white area might be correctly identified as someone from the ghetto. Today, this association is likely to be wrong, for the black stranger may be from a nearby gated community, an upscale apartment building, or a suburb. For bigoted whites, black people’s most important characteristic is their color, a profound marker of their status and identity. Blackness is, as Everett Hughes put it, a “master status-determining characteristic” (Hughes 1945; see also Sylvester 2011), superseding other attributes of identity based on class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Misjudgments on

this score are common. Even other middle-class blacks may mistake an anonymous black person for someone from the ghetto.

The black middle class is now much larger than it has ever been. Many blacks now live and work in racially mixed settings where people like themselves rarely appeared in the past. These situations produce contradictions and dilemmas of status (Hughes 1945) for both whites and blacks, albeit in different ways. Many white people express dissonance, and sometimes resentment, when blacks occupy positions at odds with ordinary expectations. Their color often renders blacks ineligible for the consideration and privileges that accrue to whites of their class.

As the presence of blacks and other people of color in the workplace and other areas increases, the argument that racism is the sole factor denying opportunities to blacks and that the system itself is racially exclusionary loses its force. Accordingly, racism becomes prematurely degraded as an explanation for inequality. In essence, the power of racial exclusion as a concept has been weakened by the proliferation of token blacks who contribute to the appearance of inclusiveness in the workplace and other areas of American life. Symbolically, they represent the wider society as a world of universalism, values supported and confirmed by black visibility there. In another, more critical respect, the token, a direct product and symbol of affirmative action and diversity programs, is commonly defined and interpreted as representing the iconic ghetto. The two tokenisms operate as flip sides of the same coin. In this occupational context, contradictions and dilemmas of status are common, becoming most critical when tokens find their moral authority and credibility tested and found wanting.

In these circumstances, middle-class black people operating in predominantly white or racially mixed areas of the wider society are sometimes powerfully reminded of “who they are” and put on notice that as black people they occupy a perpetually provisional status. They encounter one white person after another who needs to be impressed anew that they are competent, decent, law-abiding, and normal people. Black women and men alike who have worked hard to achieve upward mobility find that they must develop interactional strategies to cope with this problem. Most simply, in seeking acceptance and respect, many work to distance themselves from people who resemble the stereotypical ghetto resident (see Goffman 1963; Anderson 1990, 1999, 2011, 2012). Concomitantly, blacks find they must also prove that they are deserving of any position they attain rather than being simply beneficiaries of affirmative action. Many whites mistakenly but tenaciously believe that under affirmative action programs blackness trumps all other qualities and that black individuals have been hired and promoted solely because of their race, rather than their skills or expertise.

As black people increasingly occupy responsible positions in public institutions, rather than being confined to lowly and demeaning ones, some exercise supervisory authority over white employees—a sometimes highly charged situation for those whites who assume that they themselves, but not black people, are entitled to positions of such authority. Moreover, as the black middle class has grown and residential barriers have fallen, blacks have moved into formerly all-white

neighborhoods. The symbolism of these shifts is remarkable but ambiguous, and the black presence in so many new social settings is often provocative.

Amid profound changes in the occupational structure as well as the racial hierarchy, apparently, a growing number of whites fear that their own opportunities are being abrogated by the advancement of blacks, with the result that political support for affirmative action programs has nearly evaporated and many white citizens seek to discredit its putative beneficiaries. In its specifically working class form, white privilege rested on exclusive claims to stable, well-paid jobs, most of which required little education or specialized training. For instance, over many generations, jobs as police officers and firefighters and those in the building trades had been reserved for white men. Thus, whites are not wrong when they contend that a monopoly they once possessed has been challenged by the entry of black people. Indeed, the successful black person with a good job often becomes the personification of the distress these white men feel over their own lack of decent jobs. They regard the black persons occupying such positions as illegitimate or undeserving.

With intensifying racial competition, issues of “standards” and “merit” surface, often for the first time, in occupations once filled largely by nepotism. Numerous white working-class men have become convinced that any black person’s advancement is unfair and comes at their own expense. For whites whose own status is precarious (see Anderson et al., this volume), the sudden intrusion of blacks into previously white occupations and neighborhoods has been shocking. In addition to the politics that have led to the termination of affirmative action and set-asides, some have waged a relentless campaign, with tactics of harassment, against blacks for what they regarded as their occupations. We are now at a point where “diversity”—the inclusion of a few people of color among an organization’s ranks—has become a substitute for public policy that comprehensively and effectively equalizes opportunity.

Even elite whites who more commonly associate with well-educated, black professionals have come to feel that the playing field has been leveled and that the United States has become a postracial society. In an open, meritocratic system, they think, remedies for the legacy of racial exclusion and discrimination are no longer required. Paradoxically, blacks’ visible success set the stage for the increasingly common attitude that if black people are not present in the workplace, it is likely to be their own fault as individuals. In these circumstances, attitudes shifted from holding the system responsible to blaming the victim.

Concurrently, the inner-city ghetto became increasingly impoverished and socially isolated, most often because of structural changes in the economy that limited the availability of high-wage, low-skilled industrial jobs (Wilson 1987, 1997; Anderson 1990). These shifts undermined the quality of life in many inner-city communities and accelerated the departure of well-educated, middle-class families for neighborhoods with better schools and services. This exodus deprived the black community of many of its leaders and role models. The black professionals who head social service agencies and health centers are not an adequate

substitute for the scores of local businesspeople, ministers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, and nurses who lived in the community and led many black organizations (Drake and Cayton 1945; Spear 1969). Those who remained in the ghetto tended to become more distant from their liberal white allies, who had already been alienated by the move toward Black Power and cultural nationalism. Black identity became increasingly confused with ghetto lifestyles, and a particular type of lower class black youth culture was glamorized and propagated by the media.

As the black middle class operates within predominantly white society, it masks the reality of life for the black underclass (Anderson 2008; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987). All across the country, impoverished black communities are seemingly on the verge of self-destruction. In Philadelphia, the poverty rate is 25 percent, and black and Latino ghetto communities are disproportionately represented in this statistic. For many in this community, jobs that pay a living wage are almost nonexistent, and mutual support networks have frayed. Children grow up without two parents, and sometimes with none. Philadelphia's murder rate is among the highest in the country, and its ghetto streets are very dangerous. As long as the mayhem is confined to the ghetto, most whites appear indifferent. Stories about memorial ceremonies for slain youths and tearful pleas to end gang violence and reprisals seem only to justify this complacency. Ghetto residents are increasingly on their own and see no way out of their predicament (see Wilson 1978, 1987; Anderson 1990, 1999). Both blacks and whites often react with caution when they encounter black men and women they do not know who appear to be from the ghetto.

The black ghetto is typically distinguished by the local boundaries that physically separate it from the rest of the city, including wide streets, thoroughfares, or freeways, some of which were deliberately constructed to contain the ghetto. The demarcation is often a wide swath of a "no man's land," although sometimes white areas fade into homogeneously black neighborhoods. Today the ghetto is commonly regarded at best as the home of those black people who have been left behind by racial progress and, at worst, as a place inhabited by those who have failed to assume personal responsibility for themselves and their families. The inner-city poor are still commonly regarded as caught in a "tangle of pathology" (Moynihan 1965) that reproduces a cycle or culture of poverty through generations of men who fail as providers, women who bear children "out of wedlock," and youths who grow up without discipline. Increasingly, the well-off and the privileged are inclined to blame the state of the ghetto poor on the poor themselves, or on the policies developed to ameliorate persistent poverty.

But these accounts ignore the structural forces that have transformed urban America as a whole and impoverished the inner city in particular. Joblessness remains deeply racialized, and the limitations on welfare benefits for women and children and the privatization of federal housing programs have deepened the poverty of black families. When legitimate earnings and government transfer payments fell, the irregular economy picked up the slack. In many black neighborhoods, the civil law has eroded and been replaced by "street justice," with

“street credibility” serving as invaluable coin for personal security and freedom of movement in public. Fierce competition and campaigns for respect contribute to local high rates of violence and death (see Anderson 2008).

In the inner suburbs where whites live and shop in relatively close proximity to urban black neighborhoods, a distinctive configuration of race relations based on social distance is in force. A careful observer realizes that this seemingly safe space is premised on fear of ghetto residents and the exclusion of black people from jobs they might hold, revealing the taken-for-granted yet powerful patterns of race relations that shape predominantly white public settings in otherwise diverse cities.

The Ardmore Farmers’ Market

The Ardmore Farmers’ Market is located in a well-kept suburban neighborhood just outside Philadelphia a few miles from a large black community. On a normal day, the parking lot is filled with late-model SUVs and other expensive, high-performance vehicles, as well as an occasional Prius or Subaru station wagon. Inside, the sights and smells of appetizing food create a warm and friendly atmosphere. The diverse clientele is made up of mostly white middle-class women, relatively fewer men, and a mixture of Jews, Italians, Asians, and Irish people. At midday, shoppers slowly make their way through the aisles inspecting the farm-fresh foods. The newly built market is spiffy, orderly, and calm. The market and the surrounding area are generally considered safe.

Sitting in the lounge-cafe area one afternoon, I am struck by the fact that very few black workers and almost no black customers are visible. Of about fifty people who staff the stalls, only two are black. A female deli clerk busily serves up meats and other prepared foods, smiling and making eye contact with the customers as she carefully takes their cash and makes change. A young black male janitor and a younger white boy clean up. They are especially attentive to debris on the tables and floor of the lounge area, but they keep the entire market neat.

The deli clerk and janitor are exceptions in what is otherwise an all-white environment. The work being done here could be performed by almost anyone with a basic education and average intelligence. Yet almost all the clerks, cashiers, janitors, and security guards are white or Asian. It makes sense that those who staff the Asian food center are Asian, but why do whites sell every other kind of food? The conspicuous absence of blacks from this place is telling. Throughout the day, shoppers and employees are subtly reminded that this setting is free of blacks, despite its proximity to the ghetto. People treat this lack of diversity as normal, but everyone present collaborates in establishing this reality.

When an armed robbery occurred recently in the surrounding neighborhood, the suspects were described as young black men who most likely came from the nearby ghetto. The anxiety provoked by the armed robbery means that all black people who visit the market, especially young men, are subjected to increased

scrutiny and treated with a degree of suspicion by white clerks, while white shoppers warily keep their distance. Here, as in so many other places, black people perpetually hold a provisional status. The whites they encounter place the burden of proof that they are law-abiding citizens on them. The unspoken but well observed rule of public space is: Beware of black people, especially young males! The iconic ghetto is the point of reference for any and all blacks who appear in predominantly white settings, especially when incidents of crime permeate this bubble. Whites resort to thinking in stereotypes, as though their suspicion of blacks were justified.

The Iconic Negro

The iconic ghetto is complemented by the iconic Negro, the image on which many racial stereotypes are hung. Outsiders typically have little real familiarity with ordinary black men and women who conduct their lives primarily within their ghetto communities. But the full weight of the ghetto stereotype falls on any black person appearing in public. This country's most pernicious racial stereotypes of the violent black street criminal and the "black rapist" carry an attribution of criminality and excessive and violent sexuality—or the image of a "big, black, and scary" male posing a danger to everyone—as well as racial threat. Consequently, ordinary people often approach an anonymous black male with a degree of unease and, depending on the circumstances, a deficit model, counting his race as a strike he must shed to be treated as a full person (see Anderson et al., this volume). His clothing style and other aspects of his self-presentation may be emblematic of the ghetto, discrediting him further. For many of the wider society, the young black male dressed in a hoodie is the personification of trouble from the ghetto. Typically, the black man is treated as a dangerous outsider until he proves he is worthy of trust. And his blackness itself often disqualifies him from white society's superficial standards for common courtesy.

The other notorious and persistent ghetto stereotype is the "welfare queen," an overweight, hyperfertile, openly sexual, and improperly aggressive black woman who obtains benefits that she does not deserve while lazing around and enjoying luxury consumer goods. This image, propagated by Ronald Reagan and other conservative politicians, helped to justify the Clinton administration's abolition of "welfare as we know it"—a key measure among numerous attacks on the social safety net (see Edelman 1997). In racially mixed settings, the black woman with children in tow might be perceived as loud and boisterous, seemingly unfeminine yet sexualized, more bestial than human. In shopping malls and on public transportation, she strikes her children and curses them out in front of strangers, her face contorted as she barges along among middle-class black and white people who sometimes glare at the spectacle in disgust. This icon of the black woman on welfare hides from the consciousness of most citizens the fact that most families supported by and dependent on welfare are white.

The images of the black criminal and the welfare queen hold a threatening or transgressive status and these stereotypes simultaneously encourage the wider society to pigeonhole blacks and relegate them to the category of “other.” These two images personify a status threat when some whites observe blacks who act “uppity.” Occupying the dominant position in the racial hierarchy, and supported by the master status of whiteness, many whites have come to expect deference from blacks who make it out of the iconic ghetto into “polite society.” Some may still believe that blacks are biologically inferior and that they should be grateful for being admitted to racially mixed settings. Behavior from black people that does not fit ordinary expectations may be taken as threatening, and behind that sense of threat, the most insecure whites fear losing status to blacks (see Blumer 1958).

Although black people increasingly inhabit diverse positions in society, negative stereotypes persist and adapt to changing social situations. For instance, the ghetto stereotype follows middle-class black families into the suburbs. Some whites eye their new neighbors warily because they are not used to living near black people, perhaps thinking of them as “nice black people” who are exceptions to their race, or suspecting they have not arrived through legitimate means. Could they be drug kingpins? How else to explain a black man who drives a new Lexus and sends his children to private school?

When whites encounter a black stranger in public, the iconic ghetto almost invariably serves as a reference point to interpret his or her identity and the import of his or her presence, and this is especially true when the ghetto community is located nearby. This association, which is made in a split second, shapes the initial interaction, and sometimes never disappears. If the encounter deepens, the black person has a chance to disabuse the white person of such assumptions, but that always requires work and, often, more time than is available. In initial encounters with blacks, whites may apply a deficit model to the black person, who is then required to prove that he or she is worthy of decent regard, not to mention respect. Therein lies a powerful social tension that blacks tend to assume pervades interracial interactions. As black people navigate their way in white-majority settings, while favorably impressing the whites they encounter, they often remain on probation or occupy a provisional status, knowing that they have something more to prove.

Hence, in their quest for decent treatment in their relations with members of the wider society, blacks must constantly manage their identities, adjusting their self-presentations against the stereotype of the iconic Negro. The black person striving for social acceptability may self-consciously use standard English, mimicking the speech styles of upper-middle-class whites, modulating his or her voice, and self-consciously observing a formal etiquette of propriety. This self-presentation may come off as somewhat stiff, at times pedantic or old-fashioned. Yet the association of black skin with the powerful image of the ghetto can easily overwhelm the black person’s best efforts and attract closer scrutiny, as whites struggle to recalibrate their interactions with the anonymous black person against the

image of the iconic Negro they may see the person as puzzling, incongruous, or simply out of place.

Many black males report that they must disavow negative associations through successive positive interactions. To gain the acceptance of whites, black men deliberately distance themselves from “big and scary” aspects of the widespread stereotype, behaving as unobtrusively as possible, striving to remain self-contained, moving slowly rather than suddenly, and keeping white people at arm’s length. Except among their kind or with others who have earned their trust, black people can feel always “on stage.” At times, they may consciously work to claim a connection with the dominant society, instrumentally making a show of their education and cultural refinement and dressing conservatively in conformity with the codes that prevail in the white milieu they inhabit.

A young black man named Derrick was pleasantly surprised by his encounter with a white woman in Rittenhouse Square, one of Philadelphia’s premier “cosmopolitan canopies” (Anderson 2011). His account is germane:

One evening on my way home from work, dressed nicely in a suit and tie, I stopped to have a seat on one of the benches in Rittenhouse Square. I was twenty-nine at the time, and I sat down next to this older Caucasian woman, who was maybe about forty-five. When I first sat down, we didn’t talk, but then something amusing happened, and she made a comment and then I made a comment. This was followed by a long stretch of silence until something else happened, and we both commented on it. Finally, she opened up a conversation by asking me whether I was on my way home from work. I told her that, yes, I was coming from work, but I was looking for a new job. She shared that she had played hooky from work that day to take her mother out to lunch for her birthday. She said she lived in Rittenhouse Square. I was working in real estate at the time, and we chatted about that for a while. We had a really good conversation, and had it not been for that atmosphere [see Anderson 2011], maybe the conversation would not have taken off.

I’m a six-foot-one-inch black guy, dark-skinned, about two hundred pounds. I always joke that I fit the description of about every young black male criminal you see on TV. So I understand that people aren’t always comfortable talking to me. I’ve learned to smile a lot. If I’m thinking hard, I might have a look on my face that appears angry, but if you talk with me, you’ll see that it’s the opposite. It’s just that most [white] people don’t get that far.

In public, out of frustration and in an attempt to rehabilitate their sense of self, some young black men, and black women, actively defy the image of the overly deferential, obsequious black person. Instead, they present themselves as loud, speak in unmodulated voices, and consciously use “Black English,” a dialect that many whites view as ungrammatical. Using the markers of the iconic Negro deliberately to push back against whites’ ignorance and control, they refuse to conform to the norms of civility that prevail in white environments, aware that, even if they wanted to, they would never belong.

At the same time, some middle-class black people treat the ghetto as a source of authentication. In so doing, they conflate a positive black identity with the ghetto, embracing common stereotypes and falling into the conundrum that

others seek to avoid. Such measures allow them to feel that they have not sold out, have not assimilated or succumbed to the wider society's rules, even when their actual material circumstances might suggest otherwise. These people sometimes code switch, moving back and forth between Black English vernacular and "white" English with ease. For them the 'hood becomes a credential, signifying a peculiar brotherhood of the oppressed that many middle-class blacks embrace in defense of themselves.

The historical confinement of blacks is no less effective if it is increasingly economic rather than a result of actual segregation; the relatively well-off are likely to move out of the 'hood into middle-class settings. Other modes of containment are legal, as the incarceration of so many young black males attests. Jails and prisons, like the ghetto, are so removed from most whites' experience that they barely register, or, if they do, they are taken as evidence that the iconic ghetto exists and that its inhabitants are all criminals.

Flash Mobs

Recently, flash mobs have appeared in downtown Philadelphia. These roving groups of predominantly, though not exclusively, black high school students are organized through social networking media such as Facebook and over smart cell phone networks. At the appointed time, young people arrive at a designated location and form a mass that gathers steam as it roams Center City. Most participants come looking for fun; some are curious about what might happen when so many youths congregate in public. Caught up in the moment and under the cover of anonymity that a crowd provides, individuals act out, laughing, screaming, and playing with abandon until the carnival atmosphere turns sinister. Other pedestrians are terrified; occasionally people get punched or trampled. The throng rolls through shopping malls like a wave, sweeping over everything in its path. Smaller bands break off as they pass through stores, pushing clerks aside and helping themselves to whatever merchandise they can grab. The most alienated young people feel a surge of personal power, surprising even themselves with their newfound strength.

As quickly as a flash mob comes into existence, it disperses. Security guards or the police arrive promptly to restore order. But the havoc has lasting effects. Pedestrians traverse downtown more warily, anxious about even small gatherings of young people of color and worrying that mayhem may break out at any moment. These incidents have reinforced the notion that young black males and, increasingly, young black females are to be feared. Flash mobs are sprinkled with white youths, and most young black people present themselves as orderly, decent, and law-abiding, but those facts do little to prevent the blame from being attached to black youth as a whole. Flash mobs have attracted heavy coverage on local radio and television stations, which have sometimes gone beyond factual reporting to exaggerate the threats of harm as well as the actual consequences.

After the event, participants in the flash mob may brag about “how many we were,” “what we did,” and how “people stood up and took note.” Indeed, flash mobs are faintly reminiscent of the civil disorders of the 1960s—except that this time, despite the limited troubles that they create, they threaten the order and civility of Center City. It is as if the image that lurks in the recesses of whites’ minds whenever they encounter a black person has come to meet them on their own turf, upsetting whites’ comforting presumption that the ghetto can be avoided and contained, leaving Center City quite safe. These deeply disturbing, seemingly contagious incidents reinforce the power of the iconic ghetto, which functions as a specter of fear and threat that whites project onto blacks. White people—and at times blacks as well—respond to flash mobs as if these youths have escaped their confinement and are contaminating places in which they do not belong.

The Shadow of the Ghetto

The inner-city black community casts a large and persistent shadow because of the ascriptive character of race and the history of American race relations. Middle-class blacks spend a good deal of time and energy among their distrustful white counterparts, distancing themselves from the ghetto. Almost every white person they meet and impress needs to be impressed again, as do his or her associates. The shadow of the ghetto follows blacks into their jobs in universities, corporations, and medical practice, where they are profiled and must wage a constant campaign for authentication as a bona fide professional. Stuck in a catch-22, middle-class blacks live a paradoxical existence: while association with the ghetto may do them psychic good, it exposes them to disrespect and treatment as second-class citizens.

Today, many middle-class blacks have never lived in the ghetto or even been there. The current situation of race in America is reminiscent of what Everett Hughes (1945) called the contradictions and dilemmas of status that are not easily resolved. When Hughes made his observations, black doctors, lawyers, and other professionals served only other black people, and second-class citizenship was the norm. Now black professionals are superficially accepted and expect to be treated with dignity and respect—at least to their faces. But the underlying contradictions that Hughes observed still exist today. Middle-class blacks who live and work in racially diverse settings experience dissonance when they are treated as if they were from the ghetto, which has become increasingly impoverished and socially isolated. At the same time, whites who encounter blacks in unexpected settings also experience dissonance and, in some cases, resentment. Immigration by people of color from Africa and the Caribbean has complicated the connections among perceived racial identity, ethnocultural self-identification, and socioeconomic status. New immigrants vie with African Americans for place and position. Immigrant families who find low-rent housing in the ghetto

often feel that they have been assigned to purgatory and strive to get out, sometimes by doubling up in better neighborhoods. The fact that not all black Americans are the descendants of the enslaved has not redounded to the benefit of those who are.

One of the most significant implications of blacks' provisional status is the veneer of racial civility that characterizes contemporary race relations. Many whites want to believe that we have arrived at a postracial America, but a majority of blacks continue to feel that the country has not yet overcome its racist past. One reason for this difference in opinion lies in political ideology, but the discrepancy, including this ideological divergence, is deeply rooted in the distinctly different life experiences of blacks and whites. The contradictory pressures of racial integration and ghetto containment as well as a profound discomfort with black presence account for the superficial civility that masks deep distrust. The imagined ghetto as social place is a default position, a social residuum to which anonymous blacks can be conceptually relegated amid the racial give-and-take of urban life. In this sense, despite the major changes that have occurred in the position of African Americans, blackness remains a marker of a caste-like status (see Anderson et al., this volume).

Riding the Amtrak

The persistence of the iconic ghetto's shrouding any and all black persons was brought home to me recently, when I traveled by Amtrak from New Haven to Philadelphia, with the train making stops in New York City, Newark, and a few other places along the way. Dressed in a dark suit and tie, and a black topcoat, I found two vacant seats and took one. I was pleased to have extra space to stretch out. As the train moved along and made occasional stops, seats filled and emptied.

In New York City, we waited while Amtrak's *Acela* train took on many more passengers. I expected someone to occupy the seat next to mine, but this did not happen. The train resumed its journey, and after about 15 minutes I decided to go to the café car for some refreshments. As I arose and looked over the car, I was surprised at how crowded the train was, since the seat next to mine was still vacant. In fact, it remained unoccupied for my entire trip to Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia, I was met at the train by Mr. Epstein, a well-dressed young white male who works for the University of Pennsylvania. A gracious host, he had invited me to that evening's panel, at which I was a speaker, and had arrived at Philadelphia's 30th Street Station to escort me to my hotel. Upon meeting, we exchanged pleasantries and then made our way through the train station to the taxi stand just outside. A middle-aged black attendant waited on us, and after we stood in a short queue for just a few minutes, he ushered us into a waiting car. Our eyes met. "How you doing?" he greeted me, smiling warmly. He seemed to ignore Mr. Epstein. "Fine," I murmured. "Happy New Year." "Happy New Year

to you, too. You da man!” he replied. “Just trying to maintain,” I answered. “I see,” he said, as he closed the cab’s door.

The attendant and I had just experienced communion based on our common skin color, with the implication that we were part of the same community, though I had never seen this man before. But clearly, he saw me as someone with whom he could be familiar, given the commonality of our occupying the same color caste and our presumed common plight with respect to race relations: we were brothers under the veil. Through our exchange, we at one and the same time acknowledged and constructed a solidarity based on presumed common experiences, histories, and future expectations pertaining to our skin color. While earlier my skin color had seemed to repel white strangers on the train, it provided a basis for this black man to give me special attention.

Returning to New Haven a few days later, I took a 4:37 p.m. *Acela* train from Philadelphia. I was able to find two vacant seats almost immediately, and sat down in one. Since it was Sunday evening, there were a fair number of travelers.

When the train arrived at Newark, New Jersey, the seat next to mine remained vacant. And then, when we arrived at New York, the train took on many passengers, who were heading up the Eastern Corridor to return to school, work, or wherever. The conductor passed through a couple of times, announcing that this train was especially crowded and that travelers should make room for others. I complied and took my coat from the neighboring seat.

Soon we departed from New York on our way to Stamford. At this point, the conductor made another pass, and after doing so—and noticing that the seat next to mine was vacant—he asked me if the seat was unoccupied. I confirmed that it was. He smiled, and said, “I’ll find someone to sit with you.” At that point, I stood up and looked around—nearly every seat was taken. I then sat back down and meditated on what had just occurred again, and how it echoed what others, such as the novelist John Edgar Wideman (2010), have remarked on: that fears of the iconic ghetto—of violence and depravity—follow black people throughout their life, repelling others even when something is at stake, such as a material benefit (like a free seat) that would easily accrue to them. It is a cruel irony that even residents of the black ghetto who resist the crushing economic and social forces at work there and live decently are victimized when they step outside the ghetto into the larger society.

In predominantly white spaces where black people are few in number, whites with marginal status may take it upon themselves to defend the space as white by harassing blacks. As documented by numerous historical and sociological studies (Du Bois 1899; Drake and Cayton 1945; Spear 1969; Hirsch 1983; Massey and Denton 1993; Sugrue 1996), harassment has discouraged black presence in workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods. Over time, black people have learned what to expect. Many of those who demand to be treated differently and are reminded of their place by being met with subtle or outright resistance seek safety by departing to less hostile places. When they cannot do so, other blacks who are

already present in white-dominated spaces typically greet them enthusiastically, forming a kind of fellowship with those who, wherever they come from, are perceived as associated with the iconic ghetto. Where blacks are a dispersed, visible minority, they may form lasting friendships that are by their nature racially based. This bonding starts a set of associations that some whites interpret as “self-segregation,” though the process is inspired by the discomfort of feeling unwelcome. In this respect, their conduct follows a path familiar in the experiences of Jews and Catholics of Southern and Eastern European backgrounds in earlier generations, who were often estranged minorities in workplaces and neighborhoods.

As a result of the racial incorporation process, a diverse array of people is now present in public and quasi-public spaces throughout any city, increasingly in the suburbs, and in many heretofore distinct racial-ethnic enclaves. But the iconic ghetto persists in the imagination of most whites. They ignore the fact that the ghetto is less absolutely black than before; many recent immigrants of color also call it home. Equally important, black people today are of every social class, reside almost anywhere in and beyond the city, and pursue a wide range of professional and business careers. As this process advances, the urban mosaic becomes more complex and pluralistic. Yet despite the expansion of racial civility, a profound stigma persists, embodied in black skin and strongly associated with the iconic ghetto.

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