To “Act White”: Negotiating Race and Biculturalism in Public Schools

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“Black people created in this land a world and I grew up in that world. We really had to use whatever territory we could create to take care of the business of making a people. And often that territory was not land, often that territory was culture. And the place where my people taught me the full range of my power as a human being was inside the black community.”

--Bernice Johnson Reagon
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Bibliography
Abstract

My following project explores the intersection of race, culture, and differential academic student outcomes in public schools. Located in my research is a deeper inquiry concerning the challenges of integrating cultural differences in public schools in particular and American institutions at large. In bringing my attention to the underachievement of black students, it is my endeavor to find and construct alternative frameworks and cultural explanations for explaining black underachievement. Embedded in my study is a discussion of racial discourse and its relation to the assimilationist paradigm that underlies our egalitarian values and ideology. By identifying black students as social and (bi)cultural actors who must necessarily navigate between different spheres of socialization and communities, I will be exploring peer relations and identity processes in public schools through the “Acting White” phenomenon first observed by Signithia Fordham in her ethnography of Capital High. Through my study I hope to argue that race operates as a central normative framework for determining self and group identity within the black community—as social actors who operate within a collective and racialized culture, black students are held first and foremost to sustaining their racial identity and moral obligations to the collective even at the expense of individual failures and sacrifice. This moral commitment and spirit of resistance was necessary in enabling blacks to collectively overcome their marginalization in a racist society, but become processes into cultural deficiencies within a structure of assimilation. In a world where educational success is strongly correlated with “Acting White,” black-Americans, who remain committed to the cultural expression of their black identity, will fail in disproportionately high numbers.
Section 1: Introduction

1.1 Racial Inequality in Schools: A Context

Despite the series of radical advances made for civil rights and racial equality in the latter half of the twentieth century, America remains a racially stratified society and economy. This is reflected in spatial segregation, our social networks, unequal resource distribution and most of all in the inequitable life chances and outcomes that continue to map the contours of our color spectrum, from the white upper class to the urban black underclass. These trends are reflected in the unequal performance levels and academic outcomes that currently define the problems of public school education—the rates of failure in schools within the poorest urban environments remain high however we choose to measure them. Although socio-structural explanations explain for barriers that inhibit social and economic mobility, both commonsensical and alternative social scientific explanations for the underachievement of black students relative to other immigrant minorities have given rise to inherently racist conclusions concerning black culture. Such explanations locate poor performance and deviant behavior within cultural deficit, oppositional culture, or culture of poverty models that currently serve as the central frameworks for explaining differential minority group outcomes.

It is my endeavor in the following study to construct an alternative framework that explains black student underachievement through a less discriminatory lens. While a social-structural explanation is important in revealing external constraints that inhibit group success and mobility, I will be turning to cultural and social explanations
pertaining to cultural experience, normative orientation and cognitive expectations as well—motivational factors that directly shape self-perception, socialization patterns and student performances in school. Thus, I emphasize the cultural and social agency of students in determining their school performance and success levels. It is my contention that the way cultural and socially normative variables have been constructed traditionally obscures the real reasons for black underperformance; my goal is to characterize them in a way that gets at the real mechanisms that both explain deficient performance and indicate why, if social structural opportunities were created, we should expect that performance would be enhanced as inner-city blacks take advantage of newly constructed opportunities.

1.2 Methodology and Argument

My following analysis operates on two levels: First, I will be studying the public school system as an institution of acculturation and socialization through which processes of learning are transferred to students. Secondly, I will be studying racial minority students—black students in particular—as (bi)cultural actors and cross-cultural mediators who necessarily navigate the separate and often isolated spheres of home and school. In characterizing school culture, I draw upon Omi and Winant to situate public school education within a greater racial project that is based within a neoconservative cultural ideology which has been prevalent in shaping institutional structures and school policies since the 1980s. Academic outcomes are correlated with general economic mobility—both reflect egalitarian values of equal opportunity, but under the cultural presumption
that social actors involved are already fully assimilated. Assimilation serves as the cultural precondition for equal treatment in an egalitarian society, for only then can everyone be treated equally, \textit{as if they are the same}. In the context of public schools with diverse student bodies, the assimilationist model of education quickly becomes problematic for social actors confronting difficult cultural dilemmas, with those students experiencing the highest levels of cultural tension and resistance—among them black-Americans—suffering the greatest disadvantage.

On an empirical level, I will be focusing on the “acting white” dilemma among black students as an entry point into discussing standard cultural explanations for black underachievement. In situating explanations for differential performance levels within the context of an assimilative school culture, I hope to understand black students as cultural actors confronting a school structure with an inherently discriminatory discourse of integration. Following my discussion and critique of explanations that define black culture in oppositional, deviant and deficit terms I will be turning to a discussion of what “black culture” means to black-Americans collectively and black students in particular, to locate individual and group identity within a larger discussion of the centrality of race and culture in American society today. By characterizing black racial consciousness as a normative orientation for social action and cultural understanding, I hope to situate my study of “black culture” in urban public schools within a larger discussion of what race and culture means for minorities within an assimilative institution.

Thus, my cultural explanation for black underachievement is as follows: as the historical and primary forerunners of civil rights activism and equality that radically
transformed the racial, social and economic landscape of America, black-Americans have culturally appropriated “race,” a social device for discrimination, into a central normative framework for determining self and group identity within a traditionally oppressed group. Black-Americans are held first and foremost to their moral obligations as members of a collective and racialized culture, even at the expense of individual failures and sacrifice. This moral commitment to a racially-bound cultural identity and spirit of resistance that historically motivated black-Americans to collectively overcome their marginalization as an oppressed group, leads to adverse consequences within a public school culture that fails to meet their educational ideals and instead, processes their cultural traits and collective racial obligations into deficits. As will be observed through the “acting white” phenomenon, assimilative behavior becomes a highly racialized matter for black-Americans across class statuses. In a world where educational success is strongly correlated with “Acting White,” black-Americans, who remain committed to the cultural expression of their black identity, will fail in disproportionately high numbers. In reconstructing the cultural explanation for black underachievement, I hope to present the beginnings of a multicultural educational paradigm to address the adverse consequences of assimilative structures for racial minorities.

Section 2: Public School Education

2.1 A Theory of Education
I will first begin by deriving a functional theory of education from Durkheim’s *Education and Sociology*. In identifying the elements common to all educational systems, Durkheim defines education as “the influence exercised by adult generations on those that are not yet ready for social life. Its object is to arouse and to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual and moral states which are demanded of him by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined” (Durkheim 71). I will be studying the public school education system as an institution that directs the development and acculturation of the student into a social being. Thus, the classroom can be understood to be a microcosm that reproduces in the adolescent the greater configuration of society; by fixing in the child the basic values, norms and similarities that collective life demands, education is essentially “the only means by which society prepares, within the children, the essential conditions of its very existence” (Durkheim 71). Structurally, the school is comprised of a system of rewards and punishments that reinforces particular behaviors while sanctioning others. Even in a complex society with an extreme division of labor, common education must continue to transfer a common set of values, norms and practices to all children indiscriminately across social categories, even though education itself can be diversified and specialized (Durkheim 119).

2.2 Neoconservative Education Reform: From *A Nation at Risk* to *No Child Left Behind*

Emerging from the Reagan period of the 1980s, the neoconservative educational reform movement continues to operate as the central framework for organizing public
schools today. This education movement, in rendering the ideology of ethnicity theory—which was first prominent in the 1930s and 40s—into neoliberal form served as a 1970s backlash to minority demands for group rights, which sought a radical collective equality (Banks 2006:129). According to this theory, “ethnicity would wane in nation-states as they became increasingly modernized, that interest groups would be related primarily to social class and to other voluntary and achieved affiliations” (Banks 2006:181). Thus, there is a reluctance to engage in “race-thinking” within neoconservative state politics because racial and ethnic categories are not perceived to be significant factors in determining life chances—the problems of racial discrimination are assumed to eventually resolve themselves in an advancing state economy. In emphasizing American ideals of individualism and market-based opportunity, group rights are deemed illegitimate from the neoconservative perspective because they challenge fundamental American democratic ideals which are based on the equality of individuals (Banks 2006:128).

This carries great consequences for how the educational system and culture is structured: “If the individual is the measure, our public concern is with the individual’s capacity to work out an individual fate by means of education, work, and self-realization […]. Then how the figures add up on the basis of whatever measure of group we use may be interesting, but should be of no concern to public policy” (Glazer, *Affirmative Discrimination*, p. 220). Thus, racial equality is perceived to be an individual matter rather than a group or collective concern, contrary to the demands for group rights and equality presented by minority movements in the 1960s. In face of the radical demands of
black radicals and other new social movements, ethnicity theorists allied with the neoconservative right to “stem the tide of radical collectivism which the black movement had set in motion” and reinserted ethnicity theory as the dominant ideology of race, ethnicity and equality in public discourse (Omi and Winant 1994:131). The refusal to acknowledge structural discrimination as well as an insistence that important forms of racial discrimination have already been eliminated, rationalizes existing systems of racial inequality. As a result, the education reforms of the Reagan era dropped desegregation appeals, affirmative action programs and integration efforts that were actively sought for in the previous decade.

The emergence of neoconservative education school reform was legitimated by the 1983 issuance of the report, *A Nation at Risk*, which blamed public schools for the international failings of the US economy (Spring 2005:470). This report stated that more than 40% of students were unprepared for work or college, and further suggested that civil rights enforcement from the prior two decades was detrimental for basic education (Tyack 2001:187). This led to drastic standardized reforms which stated the dependence of economic security on education reform, and recommended higher standards for graduation, more courses in traditional subjects—particularly in the fields of math and science, and high-stakes testing throughout the nation (Tyack 2001:187). Furthermore, public schools were increasingly restructured through the adoption of business strategies such as consumer choice and economic competition—thus, the schools were directly structured according to the needs of the labor market (Spring 2005:470). The No Child Left Behind legislation which characterized the education reforms of the last decade
reinforced the same neoconservative agenda with great cultural implications concerning education for minority students. Since No Child Left Behind dramatically changed a previous 1965 legislation, which was designed to eliminate poverty in the United States through compensatory programs for the “culturally disadvantaged,” the coverage of the 1965 legislation for a specified group of minority students was extended to all students throughout the public schools (Spring 2005:488). The effect of such legislation was that it further undermined preexisting equitable policies that sought to address inequalities in schooling. Regarding cultural and language issues, No Child Left Behind reinforced a monolingual and monocultural society and school culture by “erasing the efforts by Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans to institute bilingual education in public schools,” thus undermining past efforts to create multicultural school systems (Spring 2005:489). The trajectory of educational reform policies from *A Nation at Risk* to No Child Left Behind reflect the increasing establishment and standardization of a monocultural and individualistic school system that fails to accommodate diverse student bodies.

2.3 The Problem of Assimilation: Public School Education as a Racial Project

Despite the neoconservatives’ statement of racial and cultural neutrality, there exists an underlying cultural agenda by which the practice of color-blindness comes to legitimate potentially racist and discriminatory presuppositions, practices, and outcomes within the public school system. This covert racism stems from the premises of ethnicity theory, which provides most of the concepts and presumptions regarding race and culture
that informs how public policies are formed, and educational institutions structured. In *Racial Formation and the United States*, Omi and Winant defines the ethnicity paradigm as representing the mainstream of the modern sociology of race. Having first emerged in the pre-1930s to challenge the biologistic theory of race, ethnicity theory became the liberal “common sense” that was readopted by neoconservative egalitarianism to de-legitimate minority claims to group rights (Omi and Winant 1994:14). Ideologically, egalitarian values and ideals developed through the ethnicity paradigm as the United States was driven to address matters of racial inequality. The legitimation of desegregation and the vision for what racial integration would entail stems from the ethnicity paradigm as well. As a theoretical framework that was historically developed through the observation of early European white immigrants from the Atlantic migration waves of the 19th and early 20th centuries, ethnicity theory based definitions and social expectations for racial minorities upon the acculturation experiences of white immigrants decades before. The acculturation process entailed assimilation into a unitary majority culture of Anglo-conformity, within which ethnic groups will be able to achieve high group status and mobility through hard work, patience and delayed gratification (Omi and Winant 1994:19).

The capacities and ideological limitations of the ethnicity paradigm for attaining racial equality in the United States are evident within the above characterization. On one level, it provided the necessary grounds for legitimating desegregation, proving integration to be desirable for the progression of American democracy. The problem of racial inequality was to be resolved through the elimination of racial prejudice and
segregation, after which Blacks would finally integrate into the mainstream of American life and “carve out their own rightful place in American society” (Omi and Winant 1994:19). Civil rights demands were further legitimated within the ethnicity paradigm under egalitarian values of equal opportunity. However, this means that egalitarianism can only address the problem of racial and ethnic differences, as well as cultural integration, in limited terms. Assimilation is viewed as the most logical and ‘natural’ response to the dilemma of racism. In a framework of equal opportunity, “ethnic groups bring different norms to bear on common circumstances with consequent different levels of success—hence group differences in status” (Omi and Winant 1994:21). Thus, the capacity for success is reflected in an ethnic group’s “willingness” and ability to accept the norms and values of the white majority, and “common circumstances” are treated as givens that the ethnic group must accommodate to. Following this reasoning, racial groups and minority cultures that resist or fail to assimilate are thus treated as deviant, problematic and pathological, giving rise to “good” cultures and “bad” cultures that are generally rationalized by social explanations that blame the victim for their plight and lack of success.

James A. Banks (2006) criticizes such a reductionism of race into ethnic terms in his following argument:

As in most societies, ethnic minority groups in America are victims of racism, stereotypes, and are disproportionately represented in the lower socioeconomic classes and are heavily concentrated in the blighted sections of rural and urban areas. The color of most American ethnic minorities is one of their salient
characteristics and is a significant factor which has decisively shaped their experiences in the United States. Any comparisons of European immigrants and America’s non-White ethnic minorities which do not deal realistically and seriously with this exceedingly important variable are invidious and misleading.

(P. 60)

Individuals acquire their “color status” from their identification with a particular racial group which predetermines differential treatment. Thus, “no matter how culturally assimilated an Afro-American becomes, his or her skin color remains a social stigma of immense importance to all white ethnic groups” (Banks 2006:60). The ethnicity paradigm’s implicit treatment of minority groups in racial terms, and the placement of minorities from various subgroupings within broad categories including “blacks,” “Asian-Americans,” “Hispanic” and so forth reflects a deeper racial project in a paradigm that was believed to have resolved the problem of race. The problematic reduction and elimination of race from discussions of ethnicity and minority cultures impede an ideological ability to deal with particular characteristics of racial minority groups in discussing the ideals and challenges of cultural democracy, pluralism and integration. Implicit in egalitarianism is the cultural presumption that its values can only be exercised among fully assimilated individuals across racial and ethnic categories, on the basis that they be treated as if they are the same. This inevitably contributes to a cultural deficit model of explanation when deviant cultures that fail to assimilate are deemed to be pathological. A society that grounds democracy and equal opportunity upon this presumption of minority culture also generates a social structure in which assimilation
necessarily serves as the cultural precondition to civic participation, upward mobility, and social power.

Despite advances made for the elimination of segregation and institutional prejudices, racial inequalities continue to exist in terms of unequal outcomes, life chances, educational levels, and socio-economic status. In attempting to explain the generally wide divide in i.q. levels between Black and White Americans—while dismissing other socio-cultural and environmental explanations as satisfactory explanations for the gap—Charles Murray suggests the possibility of genetic differences in determining differential intelligence levels between races (Murray and Herrnstein 1994). An even more interesting comment was made when Murray dismisses the effects of historical confrontations upon the experiences of minority racial groups, by arguing that this sense of ethnic inferiority “is in the process of diminishing as African Americans define for themselves that mix of qualities that makes the American black clan unique. […] It emerges in fiction by black authors and in a growing body of work by black scholars. It is also happening in the streets” (Murray and Herrnstein 1994). Immediately following this statement, Murray (1994) argues that “we are not giving up on the melting pot,” and presents the following ideal narrative of the assimilated individual:

The tighter the clan, the more likely it is to look suspiciously on their children who depart for the Great World—and yet also, the more proudly it is likely to boast of their successes once they have made it, and the more likely that the children will one day restore some of their ties with the clan they left behind. This is one of the great American dramas.
In depicting the American Dream for racial minorities in the land of equal opportunity, Murray sidesteps socio-structural explanations for the existence of racial inequality between group outcomes and performance levels. Furthermore, Murray rationalizes these inequalities by “look[ing] ahead to a world in which the glorious hodgepodge of inequalities of ethnic groups—genetic and environmental, permanent and temporary—can be not only accepted but celebrated” (Murray and Herrnstein 1994). Within the ethnicity paradigm, trends of underachievement become attributed to individual characteristics reflecting “deficiencies” in performance levels, which can potentially generate invidious conclusions about racial groups while neglecting socio-structural processes that turn such differences into faults.

The fundamental assumptions concerning race, ethnicity and the socialization of racial minorities described above have shaped public school education reform since the neoconservative movement of the 1980s. This carries great implications for the way minority students are acculturated and socialized in schools, as well as the ways their differences are processed into traits that may enable or inhibit their achievement. The social structure and culture in schools are organized in ways that facilitate individualistic, achievement-oriented, and egalitarian values within a “culturally-neutral” environment. However, as will be shown in later discussion, “achievement” consists of a specific form of cultural performance that carries great racial implications for black students. As a public institution operating under a neoconservative ideology with an underlying cultural agenda, the public school serves to be an assimilative structure where academic
performance is determined in part by cultural performance, with cultural conformity being awarded and cultural deviance, penalized.

Section 3: “Acting White”: Race, Culture and Education

3.1 Differentiating Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Public Schools

By locating assimilation within the ethnicity paradigm, one realizes the limitations of its applicability to racial minorities in general and bicultural minority students in particular. The experiences and challenges that racial minorities face are substantively different from those of early European immigrants, from which our dominant presumptions concerning ethnicity, culture and integration were first drawn. James A. Banks defines the ethnic minority group as characterized by several unique attributes: “Although an ethnic minority group shares a common culture and a sense of peoplehood, it also has unique physical or cultural characteristics which enable persons who belong to dominant ethnic groups to easily identify its members and thus treat them in a discriminatory way” (Banks 2006:60). Furthermore, “as in most societies, ethnic minority groups in America are victims of racism, stereotypes, and are disproportionately represented in the lower socioeconomic classes and are heavily concentrated in the blighted sections of rural and urban areas” (Banks 2006:60). Thus, racial minorities often confront greater socio-structural and cultural barriers that inhibit their assimilation and upward mobility, leaving them in a subordinate power position relative to autonomous
white minorities. Cultural integration comes to be more favorable for some groups and less so for others due to discriminatory practices and ideologies, with the least assimilated occupying the most marginalized positions.

Following this observation that the experiences and challenges of biculturalism are vastly different between groups, anthropologist John U. Ogbu outlines three distinct minority types that reflect a dominant set of circumstances, experiences, and challenges unique to each group. In basing his research and study within urban public schools in America, Ogbu addresses the problem of the black-white achievement gap, as well as black student underachievement relative to immigrant minority students, by offering a new explanation to dominant views “that heredity and home experiences are the major determinants of differences in school learning” (Ogbu 1978:16). Ogbu further refutes dominant explanations for black underperformance by concluding from his comparative research that “(1) no minority group does better in school because it is genetically superior than others; (2) no minority culture is better at educating its children In Ogbu’s cultural-ecological theory of minority school performance; and (3) no minority language is better suited for learning in school” (Ogbu 1998:157). Thus, differences in minority school performance cannot be attributed to cultural, linguistic, or genetic differences—as conventional explanations for black underperformance often suggest—because “it appears that the minorities who are doing better are those most distant in culture and language from the public school” (Ogbu 1998:161). Structural barriers and discriminations are acknowledged to be important determinants for low student achievement among minorities, but they are not the sole causes of underperformance,
given the academic success of some minority groups relative to others despite similar socio-economic circumstances and limitations.

Instead, Ogbu considers the histories and sociocultural adaptations of minorities given their history of incorporation, which consequently shapes their perceptions and responses to schooling in generating differential modes of behavior and educational outcomes. His cultural-ecological analysis explains minority group experiences on two levels: 1) the system “in which the way minorities are treated or mistreated in education in terms of educational policies, pedagogy, and returns for their investment or school credentials” and 2) the community forces that characterize “the way minorities perceive and respond to schooling as a consequence of their treatment” (Ogbu 1998:158). The collective problems of instrumental discrimination (in social structure), relational discrimination (in social relations/segregation), and symbolic discrimination (in cultural repression) necessarily generate collective solutions which come to shape beliefs about the instrumental value of schooling, relational interpretations of schooling, and symbolic beliefs concerning the potential harm of schooling for minority cultural and language identity (Ogbu 1998:161). Sociologist Mark Gould also clarifies the conflicted processes that ultimately determine group and individual behavior by marking a useful theoretical distinction between cognitive expectations—which are modified in the face of disappointment and changing circumstances—and normative expectations, which are maintained and consistently reinforced even in the face of disappointment (Gould 2001:15-16). In the case of racial minority groups, a good education might be seen as desirable, but consistent experiences of disappointment may lower cognitive expectations
concerning its attainability and socio-economic rewards (Gould 2001:17). Together, these factors shape group patterns that constitute a set of dominant beliefs, behaviors, and challenges within which minority students must individually and collectively navigate. Within this framework, minority student actors cannot be sufficiently expressed through individualistic terms since they necessarily operate as social and cultural actors confronting a collectively-shared set of circumstances specific to their racial identity and social location.

Thus, Ogbu distinguishes three ideal-types of minorities that can effectively categorize ethnic groups across the States: autonomous minorities, voluntary (immigrant) minorities, and involuntary (nonimmigrant minorities). Autonomous minorities in the United States generally refer to white minority groups that may suffer discrimination but are not totally dominated and oppressed or structurally disadvantaged, and thus accomplish similar levels of school achievement compared to the dominant group. Examples of autonomous minorities include the Mormons, Amish, and Jews (Ogbu 1998:164). Voluntary minorities are immigrants that willingly move to the States for better opportunities than what was offered in their home country—although voluntary minorities may experience language and cultural differences, they do not experience long-lasting school performance difficulties. Some examples of voluntary minorities include immigrants from Africa, Cuba, China, India, the Caribbean, and so forth (Ogbu 1998:164). Involuntary minorities are people who have been conquered, colonized, or enslaved and thus, forcefully incorporated into U.S. society against their will. They are less economically successful than voluntary minorities, perform the most poorly in
schools, and usually experience greater and more persistent cultural and language difficulties (Ogbu 1998:164). In the context of my paper, historically enslaved black-Americans serve as the prime example of an involuntary minority group in the United States. Although voluntary and involuntary minorities often experience similar socio-structural constraints, they react to the same social situation in different ways, thus generating differential group outcomes in public schools. By identifying the fundamental distinctions between voluntary and involuntary types, one can greater understand the causes of underachievement among black students.

In public schools, voluntary immigrant minorities are described as compliant, hard-working, high-achieving, and respectful of authority (Ogbu 1998:177). Since immigrant minorities maintain a positive dual frame of reference, they seek to improve economic conditions relative to that of their homeland and are willing to accommodate and accept less than equal treatment to improve their chances for academic success. They trust that discrimination is temporary, and possess instrumental attitudes toward schooling with cognitive expectations for high returns in academic achievement. Thus, voluntary minorities are willing to assimilate and come with a “tourist model” towards learning the culture and language of a new society, in which their cultural and language differences are treated as barriers to overcome. Furthermore, education is seen as additive without any adverse consequences for their group identity (Ogbu 1998:177).

In contrast, the racial and cultural beliefs as well as social perceptions that affect involuntary minorities are in many ways, much more complex. In my description of involuntary minorities I refer to historically enslaved black Americans in particular.
Historically, such black Americans were transported to and incorporated into American society against their will to occupy subordinate roles legitimated by racist ideologies that defined them as subhuman. Thus, their position in American society has always been viewed within an oppressor/oppressed relationship reinforcing a strict dichotomy between whites and blacks. However, the emergent racial consciousness that mobilized collective activism during the Civil Rights Movement reflected black Americans’ commitment to group rights and egalitarian values—not only did they strive to be emancipated from their traditional roles, but they also sought equality with dominant groups (Ogbu 1978:24). Thus, involuntary minorities generally assert themselves as cultural actors in a way that transcends the instrumental rationality of voluntary minorities within the school system. As a race which had provided the primary labor in the building of a nation, suffered under its violent systems of enslavement and segregation, and collectively transformed its racist institutions into democratic structures, blacks embody the self-made man and the American in every sense of these terms. Thus, black Americans are deeply engaged with problems of race, culture and structural inequality in ways that are strikingly different from the separate struggles of voluntary and immigrant minorities. Their culture is deeply “black” and American in ways that the primary cultures of other ethnic and immigrant minorities will never be.

3.2 Race Consciousness as a Normative Orientation
Thus, a distinctive moral and normative obligation must be outlined for black-Americans that provides sufficient explanation for their cultural orientation and social behavior in public schools. Here, I shall argue that black students function as cultural actors operating under a central normative framework of collective racial consciousness. In the face of an assimilationist structure, blacks are less willing than most voluntary immigrants to give up their culturally constructed identity, which is the product of a series of sociocultural adaptations required to survive in conditions of severe oppression (Gould 2001:26). Durkheim affirms the conditions of this collective group consciousness in stating that “indeed, under these conditions all members of the group are not only individually attracted to one another because they resemble one another, but they are also linked to what is the condition for the existence of this collective type, that is, to the society that they form by coming together” (Durkheim 1984:60). The racial identity that emerges is mainly constructed of “secondary cultural differences,” which often develop as a response to inter-group contact when one group dominates the other (Hayes 1992:253). Ogbu thus makes the distinction between secondary cultural differences, which emphasize differences in the style of cognition, communication, interaction, and learning, and primary cultural differences, which exist before any two specific cultural groups have come into contact with each other and in turn emphasizes differences in the content of cognition, communication and so on (Ogbu 1990:148). This again reinforces the understanding that black culture serves as a competing set of characteristics and practices that are just as essentially American as the dominant mainstream culture, and therefore cannot be discarded without a sense of serious cultural and social displacement.
While voluntary minorities understand themselves to be foreigners that must necessarily learn the cultural and social ways their host society in order to function successfully in it, involuntary minorities have long been incorporated within this host society in which they must necessarily confront a historically hegemonic cultural force. It is this development of a collective consciousness and racialized cultural identity, in face of oppressive circumstances, that will be explored in greater detail for the rest of my study.

A characterization of involuntary minority students can thus be provided given this preliminary understanding. Given the oppressor/oppressed relationship that involuntary minorities have been historically situated within, involuntary minorities possess a dual frame of reference that is both negative and different in contrast to voluntary minorities. Instead of referring to a former homeland as a point of comparison, involuntary minorities refer to their socio-economic status relative to that of middle-class white Americans. Thus, they are conscious of their condition of deprivation in terms of inferior schooling due to what can only be explained as discrimination. Although involuntary minorities value education and hard work, their cognitive expectations for educational returns have been modified due to consistent disappointment and frustration—education and hard work alone are no longer seen to be sufficient in overcoming racism and discrimination. Thus, involuntary minorities often engage in various forms of “collective struggle” that emphasize group rights. All of this perpetuates a skeptical view of education as the means to greater opportunity and upward mobility, as well as a deep mistrust of white-controlled institutions. In responding to a perceived system of discrimination, voluntary minorities interpret their cultural and language
differences as elements of a collective identity to maintained, and not merely as barriers to be overcome (Ogbu 1998:175). Within their group, they are critical of minority professionals and often suspect that they succeeded by adopting white ways, thus implying their racial subordination to the cultural authority of the white oppressor—this is further reinforced by the fact that such professionals retain few ties with their original community and are not visible within it at all (Ogbu 1998:173). The perception of assimilation and “adopting white ways” as a subtractive rather than additive process, creates an experience of internal tension in which the pressures to succeed in school by conforming to school demands conflict with the racial community’s ambivalence and disapproval of “white” attitudes and behaviors (Ogbu 1998:178). This moral obligation to uphold one’s racial community and identity is a collectivistic value that is reinforced among black peers in a school culture that emphasizes individualistic values of achievement. As involuntary minorities, black students must necessarily manage multiple normative orientations and sets of obligations, among them their basic American middle-class values, their lowered cognitive expectations for returns in education, and their cultural obligations and social commitments to their racial community.

A last conceptual framework will be presented to prepare our following discussion of the “Acting White phenomenon.” Following cross-cultural research studying how biculturals manage and negotiate their dual cultural identities, Benet-Martinez et al. derived a variable that measures and qualifies an actor’s bicultural experience, with implications for their acculturation process and consequent identity formation. Biculturalism involves the concept of navigating two cultural spheres that might overlap
but generally operate autonomously from one another. Among student actors, one culture is necessarily situated at home while the other is reinforced in school. Thus, bicultural identity integration (BII) reflects the degree of cultural compatibility a bicultural actor experiences regarding both cultures, with individuals representing their two cultural identities as compatible and complementary possessing high BII and individuals experiencing oppositional and contradictory cultural orientations possessing low BII (Benet-Martinez et al. 2002:493). Four possible forms of cultural integration follow based on acculturation attitudes: “assimilation (identification mostly with the receiving culture), integration (high identification with both cultures), separation (identification mostly with the culture of origin) or marginalization (low identification with both cultures)” (Chen et al. 2008:805). It follows that high levels of cultural tension will inhibit cultural assimilation or integration and reinforce experiences of separation or marginalization, while bicultural compatibility will facilitate processes of assimilation or integration.

The acculturation route a bicultural actor takes is determined in part by the extent to which they are motivated or allowed to maintain their culture of origin, and the extent to which they are motivated to engage the receiving culture, which often embodies the cultural values and practices of the majority cultural group (Chen et al. 2008:85). Any cultural conflicts or tensions that ensue may be internalized within the individual to generate identity conflict, with adverse consequences for one’s subjective well-being. Bicultural identity and bicultural competence varies across groups depending on their different contextual pressures and affordances, and the perception that one’s various
cultural identities are incompatible may lead to feelings of ambivalence regarding one’s expected levels of cultural involvement, which contributes to acculturative stress. However, successfully integrated bicural individuals in this study are found to neither perceive the mainstream and ethnic cultures as mutually exclusive or oppositional—rather, they integrate both cultures into their daily lives, exercise behavioral competency in both cultures, and engage in a process of “cultural frame-switching” where they adjust their behavior depending on the cultural demands of the situation (Benet-Martinez et. al 2002:495). It can thus be inferred that culturally integrated individuals are not often integrated in the sense that they “merge” their two cultural orientations into a new identity—rather, they develop an instrumental attitude towards their two cultures, thus conceiving their cultural meaning systems “as a set of tools to use in different situations according to their identity dynamics and situational relevance” (Benet-Martinez et. al 2002:512). However, the development of an integrated bicural orientation is a difficult process which is further inhibited by experiences of cultural tension and opposition. This conceptual framework, given its limitations as a psychological study, places much of the responsibility of cultural integration upon individual actors themselves, rather than turning to social structures of integration and collective cultural bodies. However, since an assimilative educational institution facilitating individualistic contest mobility does not integrate other cultural orientations or behaviors in school, the closest form of integrative behavior any biculturals can perform are at best, an adaptive performance of “cultural frame-switching.” Without any structural shifts in cultural accommodation, the
seeming separation of their two cultural worlds as isolated spheres will still be maintained despite the powerful effects of home culture on school behavior.

In the case of involuntary minority black students, bicultural integration becomes a much more difficult process for them relative to other immigrant minority groups. Since bicultural identity integration is low among involuntary minorities, the tension they experience inhibits their cultural adaptation in schools. In general, successfully culturally integrated individuals require the basic precondition of performative competency within both cultural environments to facilitate cultural frame-switching behavior. While black students are completely capable of adjusting their performance to adhere to school cultural expectations by “acting White,” this is not merely an instrumental adaptation of cultural behavior, but also a highly controversial social act that implies conformity and submission to a dominant cultural (and white) authority. The understanding of formal education as an opportunity structure that guides upward mobility and advancement will only apply for bicultural individuals who fulfill the precondition of culturally adapting their behavior in compliance with school expectations. For blacks, this achievement principle and its inherent cultural prerequisites has allowed for black individuals to advance, for a price. The intersections of racial performance with academic achievement in urban public schools will be elaborated in the following section.

3.3 “Acting White”: An Ethnographic Study in Capital High
I will first begin by offering a brief context regarding the state of race relations in public schools. Although desegregation had radically transformed the social and racial landscapes of public schools by “enabling children of different racial groups to learn to understand and accept one another through increased contact in school” in order to “equalize the education experiences of children of various racial groups,” the violent resistance that followed reflected the racist sentiments that continued to exist in American society (Ogbu 1978:290).

According to Ogbu (1978):

School desegregation may simply be an attempt to match black and white students in a certain proportion to meet legal requirements. Integration, on the other hand, goes beyond that to include purposive efforts to promote educational equity in the school between the two races. When school integration occurs according to this definition, subordinate-group children are likely to improve their school performance; furthermore, social contacts, understanding and acceptance are likely to increase among children of the different racial groups. (P.291)

When one observes the problems of unequal academic outcomes, black underachievement, and racial stratification in communities which continue to sustain the separation of racial groups into subordinate and dominant groups, one can conclude that our public schools today generally reflect a process of school desegregation rather than integration. Furthermore, it is clear that desegregated schools have not successfully equalized education experiences across racial groups—“not only are old social and academic symbols of group status or group identities transferred to the desegregated
setting, but new symbols may arise there to sustain the group boundaries” (Ogbu 1978:290). Desegregation was supposed to have end all the inequalities that had risen from residential segregation, segregation of adult social networks, and prior school segregation but it is clear that racial stratification in communities continue to affect social relations and academic identities in schools, such that “even in free play children’s associations seem to be primarily based on racial origin” (Ogbu 1978:291). Thus, desegregated schools continue to “prepare subordinate-group children for inferior social, economic, and political roles while preparing dominant group children for superior roles” (Ogbu 1978:291). The adoption of a passive and neutral school policy concerning race and cultural relations merely creates a passive environment within which the student system develops, which is insufficient in promoting positive interracial social networks among peers (Ogbu 1978:291). By studying the “acting White” phenomenon among black students, one can thus draw conclusions concerning the extent by which race continues to shape social interaction, school performance and academic outcomes within desegregated but largely un-integrated school systems.

The first ethnographic study of the “acting white” phenomenon was conducted by anthropologist Signithia Fordham at Capital High, which is a predominantly black high school located in the historically black section of Washington, D.C. in a relatively low-income area (Fordham 1986:186). Given our prior conceptualization of black students as involuntary minorities with a distinctive group identity, Fordham’s study reinforces and elaborates upon their unique challenges of navigating two differing sets of normative orientations. In her study, Fordham observes a general pattern of underachievement
among black students despite their intelligence and ability to do well in school. The factors seen to be inhibiting their performance and motivation to succeed in school reflected social, rather than innate and inferior, factors indicative of the deeper challenges an involuntary minority faces in attempting to simultaneously resist and accommodate to a discriminatory school system. The achievement-oriented, individualistic and racially discriminatory principles of the school system are at odds with the collectivistic values and attributes of black culture, which are judged to be deviant and detrimental to academic learning. I will thus divide my analysis of the “acting white” phenomenon into three parts: first, an evaluation of the “fictive kinship system” which utilizes the “acting white” phenomenon as a racial device and historical survival mechanism sustaining group solidarity; second, a characterization of the school system in Capital High as an institution reflecting the “new racism” described by sociologist Mark Gould; and thirdly, an analysis of the high-achieving black student, given the oppositional pressures of assimilation and black identity. The conclusions drawn from this study will carry greater implications concerning the price black individuals must pay for upward mobility within a culturally discriminatory system.

Fordham describes fictive kinship as a “kinship-like relationship between persons with reciprocal social or economic relationship” (Fordham 1986:183). This sense of kinship is reflected in terms including “brotherhood,” “sisterhood,” “my people,” and so on—terms that refer to the understanding that, “above all else, members of such groups feel a sense of identity and an ‘interdependence of fate’ with those who share the customs of the ethnic tradition” (Banks 2006:59). This collective social identity and peoplehood
can also be defined within the Durkheimian concept of *conscience collective*, or mechanical solidarity. The racial solidarity of the black community is a strong example of mechanical solidarity, i.e. “a social cohesion whose cause can be traced to a certain conformity of each individual consciousness to a common type” (Durkheim 1984:60). Historically, there has been a collective interest and moral obligation for sustaining this group consciousness, for “they care that it should be lasting and prosperous, because without it a whole area of their psychological life would fail to function smoothly” (Durkheim 1984:60). This collective consciousness can also be understood to be a cultural framework that defines an individual and collective group’s life world, providing a model of “reality” that allows “for their ability to comprehend the [social] world, but also, comprehending it, to give a precision to their feeling, a definition to their emotions which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure it [emphasis added]” (Geertz 1977:104). In the face of racial exclusion, involuntary black-Americans have created their own collective identity in order to “invert negative stereotypes and assumptions into positive and functional attributes,” in the process establishing boundary-maintaining behavior and attitudes toward whites (Fordham 1986:184-5). This oppositional culture is collectivistic in the sense that “these values entail the possible subordination of private utility to the collective interest, constituting beliefs as obligatory and, at the same time, desirable (but not necessarily as desired)” (Gould 2001:29). Personal interests are thus subsumed by collective ends. Another central attribute of the *conscience collective* is its use of negative sanction to reinforce social cohesion.
Durkheim (1984) emphasizes that repressive law necessarily expresses and protects this solidarity:

Indeed the acts which such law forbids and stigmatizes as crimes are of two kinds: either they manifest directly a too violent dissimilarity between the one who commits them and the collective type; or they offend the organ of the common consciousness. In both cases the force shocked by the crime and that rejects it is thus the same. It is a result of the most vital social similarities, and its effect is to maintain the social cohesion that arises from these similarities. It is that force which the penal law guards against being weakened in any way. At the same time it does this by insisting upon a minimum number of similarities from each of us, without which the individual would be a threat to the unity of the body social, and by enforcing respect for the symbol which expresses and epitomizes these resemblances, whilst simultaneously guaranteeing them. (P. 61)

Although the act of violation may in itself be relatively harmless, its contradiction poses the serious threat of undermining social cohesion, and is thus sanctioned with great affective force and indignation. Durkheim describes the conscience collective as a product of historical development bearing the marks of all circumstances through which the society has lived and endured. It must thus be noted that “among the dispositions and tendencies the individual has received from his ancestors or has developed over time there are certainly many that serve no purpose, or that cost more than the benefits they bring” (Durkheim 1984:62). However, it can be maintained that most of these dispositions are not harmful, “for if they were, in such conditions the individual could not
live [and] having survived, it becomes necessary for them to continue despite their irrationality. This is generally why it is good that acts that offend these sentiments should not be tolerated” (Durkheim 1984:62). Yet in assessing the utility of this collective identity among the black community given the greater demands for assimilation, one must come to determine the relative importance of this solidarity, as well as its social function in promoting group agency and cultural empowerment.

Using Durkheim’s characterization of the conscience collective, we can thus clearly understand the dynamics and functions of the fictive kinship outlined by Fordham. In the context of Capital High, the reach and influence of the fictive kinship system is extensive and reflected in the conflicts between blacks and whites, black students and black teachers (who are perceived to be “functionaries” of dominant society), and among black peers in direct correlation with their group loyalty (Fordham 1986:185). This cultural system forms a collective identity that operates under an oppositional frame of reference, which had first emerged from black experiences of racial subjugation and white exclusion as a subordinate group. This oppositional culture is by default opposed to assimilation due to its spirit of self-preservation, and stands in tension with white culture. As a cultural frame of reference it is emotionally charged due to its maintenance of collective identity and security. As a racial device reinforcing group solidarity, the fictive kinship system defines certain attitudes and behaviors as “white” and therefore unacceptable—some examples of “white behavior” include the speaking of standard English, listening to classical music, going to a cocktail party, getting good grades in school, spending a lot of time in the library studying, going to the opera or
ballet, putting on “airs,” and so on (Fordham 1986:186). I hesitate to include high academic performance on this list because American values of education and hard work are shared by black-Americans—through the study, however, it will be shown that the stigma surrounding high grades lies in the fact that the process of academic achievement often masks the abandonment of group ties and esteem for one’s race. The fictive kinship system further possesses the characteristics of the conscience collective in its negative sanctioning of peers that deviate from the black community by “acting white,” which implies their siding with the “enemy” oppressor (Fordham 1986:182). Through negative sanctions, the group exercises moral judgment upon its members in their “evaluation of group members’ eligibility for membership in the fictive kinship system [according to] the criteria used to judge one’s worthiness for membership,” which operates autonomously “in contrast to the determination and control of the criteria for earning grades in school or promotion in the mainstream workplace by white people” (Fordham 1986:185). These negative sanctions take on the forms of labeling, exclusion, and ostracism—to be differentiated and labeled as a “braniac” will mean “social death” and rejection (Fordham 1986:191). Black students learn the meaning of fictive kinship from their parents and are socialized within it among their peers, and as a result reinforce this cultural device in schools to ensure a sense of social orientation and agency. However, this culture will necessarily be oppositional and defensive as long as it perceives the social environment to be hostile, harmful, and essentially racist. This cultural orientation encompasses all the cognitive expectations, social values, moral obligations and collective struggles that have characterized our understanding of involuntary minority
groups from earlier discussion. The racial resentment, lowered cognitive expectations, suspicion of white authorities and institutions, and collectivistic values for group advancement will necessarily affect the behavior of black students within the fictive kinship system and generally reinforce a “racialized” perception of themselves and the social environment of the school.

Given the existence of conflicting normative obligations to “do well academically and meet the expectations of school authorities on the one hand and the demands of peers for conformity to group-sanctioned attitudes and behaviors that validate black identity and cultural frame on the other,” students who wish to succeed in either aspects must find a strategy to resolve the tension (Fordham 1986:186). This bicultural tension, along with the responsibilities of fulfilling the cultural preconditions and academic demands necessary for school success, and its effects on those who resolve the tension successfully versus those who do not, constitute “the burden of acting white” (Fordham 1986:186). In Fordham’s study, there has generally been no way of successfully fulfilling these two orientations to the highest satisfactory extent. The majority of black students have been shown to resort to the strategy of “avoidance,” thus underachieving in order to avoid “acting white” in all respects (Fordham 1986:187). This serves to be a major reason for the poor performance of blacks in regard to academic success, and even black students who do not fail often perform well below their potential. The cultural stigma attached to academic achievement, the reinforcement of lowered cognitive expectations regarding returns in educational effort, and the necessity of retaining the integrity of one’s social identity serve to be factors that discourage black students from utilizing their full capacity
and potential to work hard and attain good grades. In such instances, peer-group relations and norms are highly valued despite their “detrimental” consequences to academic progress “Fordham 1986:197).

It must be noted that while the fictive kinship system as a normative framework is generally shared by all black students, there are variations in their level identification with this frame of reference. While the avoidance strategy serves to be the dominant trend reinforcing black underachievement, Fordham uses this same framework to understand the possible explanations for black student success. Among the few high-achieving black students that attempt to navigate the school system, the “affective dissonance” that reflects their sense that they are, indeed, betraying their group and its cause, is coupled with their need to accommodate to the school culture in order to achieve vertical mobility. The dilemmas of navigating two cultures that stand in opposition to each other is thus experienced to more acutely and complexly among black students who try to prove their intelligence to school authorities while simultaneously maintaining close ties and approval from their peers. There is also an uncertainty among black students who decide to “act white” concerning their acceptance by white Americans, for middle-class blacks report the same experiences of alienation within predominantly white communities; the consciousness of one’s racial identity can never be truly done away with, regardless of whether one decides to “act white” or stay black. This “affective dissonance” is experienced more acutely and complexly among students who decide to navigate a white-controlled institution “where criteria of performance have been
established by whites or their representatives, and where rewards for performance are determined by white people according to white criteria” (Fordham 1986:182).

3.4 Racelessness: An Accommodation to New Racism in Egalitarian Structures

High-achieving students have dual relationships to the fictive-kinship system as well as the individualistic and competitive contest mobility structure of public schools. The criteria required for success in schools and American society at large generally contradict with a particularistic identification with Black culture. Thus, students that are most concerned with retaining community ties often devise ways to conceal their academic efforts and high performance. In order to minimize hostility from peers, they attempt to achieve this by maintaining a low profile or adopting a comedic persona that gives the impression that one’s academic performance is not due to hard work, but instead attributed to “natural talent” (Fordham 1986:195). However, in order to accommodate themselves to an implicitly racist school system that devalues black culture as deviant and pathological, all high-achieving students must ultimately adopt a raceless persona that will inevitably effect negative perceptions on their racial identity and black community. Thus, “racelessness” serves to be a strategy utilized by high-achieving black students in order to attain vertical mobility in the school system. While other voluntary minority cultures are judged to carry less negative associations and “bad values,” the black community and culture has historically been and continues to be reinforced as an inferior culture—it follows that black students who assert their cultural identity with the most force and conviction will fail to be awarded by biased school authorities regardless
of actual academic abilities. Since it can be inferred that the majority of black students are deeply conscious of the existence of institutional racism in their schools, a main factor that determines their chance of academic success involves their decision to resist, or accommodate this racist structure.

Conversely, those students who minimize their connection to the indigenous culture and assimilate into the school culture improve their chances of succeeding in school. Unlike the students who seek to maintain their identification and affiliation with the indigenous culture, students who assimilate seek to maximize their success potential by minimizing their relationship to the Black community and to the stigma attached to “blackness”. (Fordham 1988:57)

In order to assimilate within the school structure, black students must therefore adopt values that facilitate individualistic achievement. Since “blackness” is seen to inhibit academic achievement, black students must therefore become “un-Black” through their disaffiliation from the fictive-kinship system and disassociate from all the cultural characteristics embodied within it, which includes the speaking of Black English Vernacular and the prioritization of group advancement over individual achievement. In socializing with academic authorities, black students must therefore modify their cultural behavior to adopt styles that are rewarded—often times, these characteristics are cultural and unrelated to actual academic abilities.

They consciously choose their speech, their walk, their mode of dress and car; they trim their hair lest a mountainous Afro set them apart. They know they have a high visibility, and they realize that their success depends not only on their ability
Similar to black adults working within a predominantly white workforce, black students seek to minimize the discomfort of white authorities regarding their cultural behavior—a raceless persona is the cultural precondition for equal opportunity. The only means by which their racial difference can be accommodated for is through “selective individualism,” by which black students present themselves to be exceptional individuals who are differentiated from the “black masses.” Furthermore, black student advance academically with a profound belief in the values of egalitarianism, orienting themselves to “the core of the ideology for the American social system that maintains that differences of race, religion, and natural origin are not important” (Fordham 1988:69). If individualism in an egalitarian society means discarding all differences, black students that present themselves as raceless individuals are perceived to be exceptionally different from their black counterparts, negatively in the black community and positively in the eyes of white authorities.

The adoption of egalitarian and individualistic, achievement-oriented principles comes to subsume assimilated individual perceptions, with the adverse and perhaps unintended consequence of generating equally racist beliefs among black students regarding their own racial community. Their racial identity is no longer valued as something to be maintained—rather, it becomes, as for voluntary minority groups, an obstacle to be overcome. Thus, the raceless actor subordinates one’s identity as a Black American to one’s identity as an “American” in hope that “a raceless persona will
mitigate the harsh treatment and severe limitations in the opportunity structure that are likely to confront her as a Black American” (Fordham 1988:69). Raceless students simultaneously reinforce and disassociate themselves from the negative stereotypes of black Americans that are prevalent in mainstream society, to generate racist remarks that describe black-Americans as “lazy” and attributing “widespread poverty to inadequate schooling caused by black Americans’ general resistance to investing great effort in education” (Fordham 1988:72-75). These racist judgments are generated by individualistic conceptions of success, by which “students [are] led to believe in the view of racism and discrimination as practices of individuals rather than as part and parcel of institutionally sanctioned social policies” (Fordham 1988:80). The distinctive individualistic ideology is fostered within higher-level tiers of the school structure, with the result that within Advanced Placement courses, the “school implicitly weakens collective ethos […] by enticing students who display signs of having only a marginal relationship to collectivity into participating in the special programs” (Fordham 1988:80). Once again, the public school system is proven to carry an implicit cultural agenda of assimilation.

In order to achieve upward mobility in mainstream institutions, black students must simultaneously accommodate themselves to and adopt the “new racism” that pervades an egalitarian but racially stratified American society. Sociologist Mark Gould understands this ideological system to legitimate racist social structures and practices under the assumption that discrimination no longer exists to inhibit minority access to equal opportunity. The conceptualization of individual actors as achievement-oriented
implicitly legitimates the single, positively-defined normative orientation of instrumental rationality as the only framework that should inform individual action (Gould 1992:155). Thus, alternative normative orientations, including Durkheim’s *conscience collective*, are disregarded and dismissed from possessing any rational force in dictating individual (and group) behavior. Differences stemming from collective frameworks are only perceived to inhibit individual mobility oriented towards instrumental action. In the context of the black community, “At the same time that black skin has become a less restricted impediment to occupational mobility than in prior decades, these greater opportunities for black achievement have been coupled to greater inequality of opportunity by socioeconomic background *within* the black population” (as cited by Gould 1992:158). The growing divisions that exist between the black middle class minority and the black underclass majority, can be seen in the context of Capital High, embodying a class division that is further reinforced by cultural disassociation. Thus, the inclusion of blacks within a universalistic, individualistic, and achievement-oriented system has generated greater inequalities among blacks—once again, there is a striking separation and inequality between assimilated high-achieving blacks and underachieving blacks in Fordham’s study. However, the upward mobility of a few selected black individuals does not resolve the essential gap of racial inequality between blacks and whites in terms of academic achievement: “while the relative gap between blacks and whites […] has narrowed, the absolute gap remains much the same […] after controlling for numerous background variables (Gould 1992:159). However, “the more Americans come to believe that these egalitarian values are actually implemented in society, the more comfortable
they become in negatively evaluating persons and/or group that perform less well when measured against these ‘objective standards’” (Gould 1992:161). In a school system that maintains its mistaken assumption and commonsense understanding that racial equalities are already in place so anyone can succeed so long as they try hard enough, existent inequalities are consequently attributed to “racial deficiencies” and individual faults that are either due to lack of motivation or innate inferior ability (Gould 1992:163). In assimilating mainstream values, high-achieving black students fall into these same ideological shortcomings of egalitarianism, thus generating the same racist conclusions regarding their own community. The conflation of capacities and performances also disregards the fact that black student underachievement is reflective of a social resistance to perform a cultural role, rather than a lack of intelligence to succeed in academic learning (Gould 1992:165). Thus, the successful achievement of a few exceptional individuals comes to legitimize the oppression of a collective minority group (Gould 1992:165).

The racist beliefs that are generated within an egalitarian system are due to a failure to acknowledge the fact that hierarchical racism still exists to distribute persons between inferior and superior roles on the basis of their race. Furthermore, the cultural devices that have served to orient black individuals within their racial communities are perceived to be pathological, regardless of their historical role in advancing American democracy through the Civil Rights Movement. The social tensions that have served to fracture relations between blacks and school authorities as well as high achieving students, indicate an failure for the two competing cultural systems to accommodate one
another. The division that often exists between high-achieving and underachieving black students continues to widen as minority individuals adopting the individualistic ethos of school success further disassociates from its racial and group ties, and the indignant community rejects these individuals in turn for their cooption into a dominant and racist society. According to Fordham’s study of high-achieving black students, “They do not appear to believe—nor does their experience support—the idea that they can truly be bicultural and actualize what Edwards (1987) describes as their ‘crossover dreams’” (Fordham 1988:81). One can only conclude that in order to succeed in an essentially monocultural school system, black students cannot successfully reach a satisfactory level of bicultural integration and must abandon their racial identity to essentially appear raceless. Thus, school achievement is no longer a mere exercise of instrumental rationality for black students, for deeper matters regarding their personal identity and community ties are at stake. While some individuals are willing to culturally assimilate, the majority of blacks consider the cost of school success to be too high, and the sacrifice of cultural integrity in order to “make it” to be an unacceptable option (Fordham 1988:82).

The racial dynamics in public schools constitute a microcosm that accurately reflects greater race issues that continue to permeate American society. A few questions thus remain concerning the “acting white” phenomenon and the consequent persona of racelessness as a cultural precondition to educational advancement and equal opportunity. The underachievement of blacks can be attributed to 1) their unwillingness to give up their fictive-kinship ties in exchange for participation in an individualistic and
achievement-oriented school system, and/or 2) to the school system’s unwillingness to modify existing school curricula such that a more group-centered ethos can be incorporated, “thereby enabling black students to seek self-realization through persona efforts in service to the group” (Fordham 1988:81). Given the observation that upward mobility among blacks has only contributed to friction within black communities themselves, and given the observation that upwardly mobile blacks often function as raceless individuals who reproduce racist attitudes that serve to further devalue and disempower an already oppressed racial community, I do not believe that black individuals should bear the responsibility of unequal outcomes generated from their structural and cultural subordination within public schools. Black students should not need to become un-Black to succeed, nor should they need to abandon group ties in order to accommodate themselves to a racist institution and as a result, suffer affective dissonance and internal identity conflict merely because their culture is looked upon less favorably than other minority cultures. Lastly, academic values should not be conflated with cultural values and thus, black students should be able to succeed according to their intellectual capabilities, rather than according to their ability and willingness to perform a specific cultural role.

However, the kind of structural changes that must take place to generate a more equitable cultural environment facilitating bicultural integration, remains to be clarified. It is particularly difficult because black culture functions as a competing style of cognition and American expression. As long as standard English is deemed superior to Black English Vernacular, which is judged to be a substandard form of English, and the
cultural relationship between blacks and whites continue to be expressed in oppositional terms, a state of inter-accommodation between the two cultural spheres will be unreachable. Furthermore, given the understanding that the black conscience collective is a dynamic system that has only developed oppositional qualities in response to a culturally hostile and racist environment, one can trust the cultural system to lose their oppositional qualities within a more inclusive environment where oppositional functions are no longer needed to protect group existence. The adjustment of the school system to mandate equal outcomes will help to reinforce an opportunity structure that may more realistically serve the collective advancement of black minorities and thus raise cognitive expectations and motivational factors for educational attainment. Thus, one should expect the cognitive and normative expectations of blacks to change in response to responsive shifts in school structure and ideology. The two orientations should not necessarily conflict with one another unless the assimilationist structure of the public school continues to undermine the conscience collective of blacks. While egalitarian structures, in possessing an implicitly assimilationist agenda will consequently process differences into deficiencies, equitable structures are more supportive of a multicultural agenda that can serve to facilitate the integration of differences. This multicultural accommodation of differences is essential for the effective functioning of racially and culturally diverse student bodies.

3.5 Post Capital High: Contemporary Accounts of Black Race Relations
The “acting white” phenomenon conveyed in Fordham’s ethnographic study was met with much resistance and controversy in its wake. In response to these criticisms, Fordham (2008) reflected on “the burden of acting white” since it attracted widespread popular and academic attention over twenty years ago, when her Capital High study was first conducted. Despite the wide range of materials and research that followed her study regarding the “acting white” phenomenon, she argues that all “have cited and reported [her] work in ways that paralleled neither [her] anthropological research nor [her] published findings” (2008:228). Some articles have gone so far as to “condemn the concept as an ahistorical, ‘folk’ version of a racist ideology regarding Black inferiority” (Fordham 2008:228). However, Fordham reaffirms her conviction that the burden of acting White continues to be a central phenomenon that extends beyond school structures and characterizes much of black experiences in contemporary American society. While Fordham generally replicates the descriptions and characterization of black experience she had made in her original study, she also addresses recurring misinterpretations of her concept through an assessment of the body of literature that has ensued since her study was first published. First of all, academic and popular appropriations, distortions, and supposed refutations of her theoretical claims from the study—which were “professionally unacceptable yet, haunting familiar”—reflected conceptual shortcomings that were reflective of a utilitarian and egalitarian structure of thinking, thus generating racist claims and assumptions of black cultural deficiency (Fordham 2008:229).

Many researchers, pundits, and neoconservatives “did not acknowledge that it was based on the concept of race as a forced performance on the part of African American
students or admit that the structural limitations based on race that are still an endemic feature of U.S. public and private life make Black youths’ oppositional culture a reasonable response to their bleak prospects” (Fordham 2008:229). Instead, “they proceed immediately to the misguided notion that the adoption of a stronger work ethic on the part of the Black population, especially Black children, would render these long-standing structural deterrents to social and economic inequality harmless” (Fordham 2008:229). Thus, a general argument was made that the pathological traits of the black community could be erased if Black people would behave better—a type of rhetoric that “came first and most famously from the popular comedian and television personality, Bill Cosby [on] what he identified as the inadequacies within the culture of Black people, especially their parenting and child-rearing practices” (Fordham 2008:229). This common tendency to resort to arguments that “blame the victim” failed to effectively refute Fordham’s understanding of the “acting white” phenomenon as well as the many racial and cultural dilemmas it embodied. Another central theme of misunderstanding involved the drawing of a conclusion that the underachieving peers of high-achieving Black students were responsible for limiting their academic performance. Fordham refutes this distortion of her study by arguing that all African-American students were victimized, regardless of their academic performance, “by social policies and educational practices that challenged their humanity and aspirations” and “reward[ed] this kind of dysfunctionality” (2008:235). Fordham concludes her reflection on her study of Capital High by repeating that “we overemphasize the influence of students who are not doing well academically on the performance of Black students who are successful,” without
considering the social configuration of the school in terms of racialized academic tracking and teacher’s lower expectations for Black performance in schools (2008:236).

Even though Fordham generally argues that “the Capital High study has never been replicated” as an ethnographic study, sociologist Prudence Carter presents a relatively similar study that contributes new insight to the phenomenon of “acting white.” Carter’s analyses of how minority and low-income youths navigate the boundaries between school and peer group contexts, are based on extensive survey and qualitative data collected from a series of individual and group interviews within a diverse sample of 68 low-income African American and Latino youths. In her study, she concludes that binary markers often obscure the existence of a heterogenous range of cultural and educational experiences as well as behavioral variations within the ethnoracial groups themselves. She emphasizes that “multiple frames of ethnoracial identity and cultural orientations exist among African American and Latino students that supplant either purely assimilative or assimilative versus oppositional stances in society” (Carter 2006:306). It might thus be more useful to conceive of students as actors that respond to the social boundaries of collective identities and status hierarchies in public schools in particular ways that may affect but do not entirely determine academic outcomes. Even though qualitative studies have often focused on “either conforming or disconfirming that acting white pertains to academic achievement,” Carter observes that all the youths in the study regard their racial or ethnic identity as a central component of their self-concepts, and that all students embraced dominant or mainstream beliefs about the value of education as well (Carter 2006:306). Thus, Carter reveals that the avoidance-of-acting-
white-phenomenon “has little to do with the students’ equating academic excellence with
whiteness and more to do with the students’ views about group dynamics and social
boundaries among the races at school” (Carter 2006:309). Thus, the most frequent
references to “acting white” pertain to linguistic and dress style, cultural patterns that
should not be conflated with academic values, further debunking the notion that
“oppositional cultures” inhibit academic achievement among minority students.

Following her study, Carter identifies three types of ideological profiles: 1) *cultural mainstreamers*, which emphasize both the similarities between minority groups
and whites as well as the desirable assimilation and incorporation of the former into the
opportunity structure; 2) *noncompliant believers* who subscribe to a dominant
achievement ideology and understand the cultural norms prescribed for academic
success, but choose to embrace their own cultural codes and behaviors without
conforming to mainstream and “white” ways; and 3) *cultural straddlers*, who bridge the
gap between mainstream and group cultures to act as “strategic navigators” with the
bicultural ability to function and adapt to their dual environments (Carter 2006:308).

Depending on how bicultural individuals negotiate their ethnic peer cultures, school
environments and the mainstream U.S. society which is “tacitly understood to be
controlled by middle-class whites,” minority students will approach norms of conformity
differently and display divergences regarding their “abstract,” or normative, and
“concrete,” or cognitive educational beliefs, which is a further differentiating factor in
determining their ideological orientation (Carter 2006:309). Although all youths
generally maintained high aspirations concerning the value of education, their academic
performance varied depending on their social perceptions—positive associations are found between their concrete attitudes and their GPAs, with noncompliant behaviors performing below average to average due to their pessimistic perceptions for returns in education (Carter 2006:313).

Throughout the study, observations of the “acting white” serve to reinforce the importance of racial loyalty and affiliation, and some students express disapproval when co-ethnics behave in a superior manner—“putting on airs”—that denigrates other members of their group. In other words,

Peers who dared to desecrate these fictive kinship lines by looking down on co-ethnic peers or have the dominant cultural markers of academic success, competence, and strong aptitude were equated with the racial group in U.S. society that has historically appeared to wield power in inequitable ways. In other words, they were acting white. (Carter 2006:321)

While Carter challenges oversimplified conceptualizations of minority group behavior by outlining the variations by which minority students navigate their biculturality, she reinforces the role of the “acting white” phenomenon in maintaining group ties and cultural identity, while clearly distinguishing these cultural values from academic and achievement oriented values. Thus, she argues that the value of education is not at stake—“what is at stake is how students use symbols and meanings they attach to different racial, ethnic, and cultural identities as measure of inclusion and exclusion (Carter 2006:318). The prominence of the “acting white” phenomenon in affecting individual behavior will therefore vary depending on the racial composition and
placement of black students relative to each other, with disproportionate under-
representation of black students in high-track classes perpetuating “acting white”
accusations and with these same accusations minimized in well-integrated schools where
blacks are proportionately represented across tracks (Carter 2006:322-3). The versatility
and cultural frame-switching capacities of black students further splinter the
acculturative/oppositional binary divide to indicate that “black culture” is not intrinsically
incompatible with “white culture” and academic values, and will that black peer groups
will accordingly reduce its oppositional qualities as long as the school system is
perceived to be structurally accommodating for black students.

It can thus be concluded from my research that differential academic outcomes
between and within minority groups exist as a result of the complex dynamics between
their normative expectations, cognitive expectations, and collective moral obligations as
racialized actors. The “acting white” phenomenon situates black students within an
alternative normative framework that operates at the core of their social and cultural life
within their traditional communities. Except for the deviation of a few individual blacks,
the majority of black students are unwilling to give up their racial identity to adopt a
purely assimilationist orientation within a school environment that deems their culture as
inferior. Although the disjunction between normative expectations and cognitive
expectations regarding educational returns serves as a partial explanation for the
underachievement of blacks, a further explanation must be made to account for black
students as cultural actors sharing the conscience collective. There is an aspect of black
performance that is missed by Ogbu but emphasized in Fordham’s study of the fictive-kinship system among blacks. While Ogbu dismisses the significance of the race variable as a defining feature of the involuntary minority experience and thus reduces black student behavior into oppositional, rather than positively-stated, terms of cultural expression, Fordham perceptively centralizes her discussion of black student underperformance within this same racial variable and its simultaneously cultural function in orienting group and individual behavior. The findings of her study allude to a deeper discussion regarding the intersections of race, culture, and achievement in a racially stratified, assimilationist and covertly racist society.

Section 4: Cultural Identity Movements and Multiculturalism

4.1 Ethnic Revivalism: Tracing Black Culture to its Origins

Although we have extensively discussed black culture as a central framework orienting black activity and social perceptions, we have not yet defined what black culture means within the black community. We have only so far determined the significance of race within an egalitarian society that had supposedly done away with it through the elimination of racist segregationist structures. However, we cannot fully appreciate the “oppositional” culture and spirit of resistance shared by black students without tracing their origins to a larger social movement within which race, culture and education are inextricably bound.
The Black civil rights movement that emerged in the 1960s stimulated the rise of ethnic revival movements throughout the United States as well as in other parts of the world. A major goal of these ethnic movements was to change the social, economic, and political systems so that structurally excluded and powerless ethnic groups would attain social and economic mobility and educational equality. Ethnic groups demanded changes in the education system because they believed that the school could be an important instrument in their empowerment and liberation. (Banks 2006:92)

Thus, the social movements since the ‘60s were motivated by the undercurrents of a cultural identity movement that transformed racial consciousness in the black community and American society. As James Banks recalls, “since the Black Revolt of the 1960s, we have witnessed an intensified movement among ethnic minority groups to glorify their ancient pasts and to develop ethnic pride within group members, [reinforcing] a sense of *peoplehood* […] in which the excluded group intensifies its cohesion by building a religio-cultural community of beliefs around its creation, history and development” (Banks 2006:57). It is further noted that “whenever an ethnic group intensifies its search for identity and tries to build group cohesion and solidarity, some degree of ethnocentrism and rejection of ‘outgroups’ emerges”—i.e. oppositional qualities (Banks 2006:57). In the context of the historical development of the black community, one must thus acknowledge the active and tactful construction of black culture as a racial project in
itself. As Fordham observes, “blacks may have transformed white assumptions of black homogeneity into a collective identity system and a coping strategy” (1986:194).

In their exploration of *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant characterizes ethnic revival movements as such:

The construction of an oppositional movement employs a wide variety of ideological themes. Racially based movements have as their most fundamental task the creation of new identities, new racial meanings, and a new collective subjectivity. Not only does the articulation of a new racial ideology involve the recombination of pre-existent meanings and identities, but it also draws on quite heterodox and unexpected sources. (1994:90)

By radically transforming the racial, social, and economic landscape of America and their positions within it, the black identity movement essentially involved the cultural appropriation of “race,” a social device originally used to legitimate group discrimination and repression, into a central normative framework to facilitate social cohesion and strengthen cultural identity within a traditionally oppressed group. This cultural inversion of the function of race is strengthened by the preexisting ties that have already developed within the black community from their racial exclusion and history of enslavement. In contrast with other immigrant minority groups, the culture of black-Americans is highly synonymous with their racial identification such that they share an essentially racialized, rather than merely “ethnic,” culture. Their cultural movement restored a sense of ethnic pride by inverting the traditional meanings of blackness into something new and affirmative, i.e. *Black is Beautiful*. By challenging the dominant racial ideology, black
Americans reconceptualized their own racial identity and reformulated the meaning of race in general. As their status is inextricably linked with that of white Americans, “to challenge the position of blacks in society [was] to challenge to position of whites” as well (Omi and Winant 1994:91). The establishment and articulation of an oppositional racial ideology serves to be the necessary precondition for a greater social movement by which black Americans may “begin to upset the unstable equilibrium of the racial order” in order to demand the reform of state racial policies and institutions (Omi and Winant 1994:91).

Even though the Civil Rights Movement initially reinforced the ethnicity paradigm and an integrationist approach that emphasized “equality” between individuals, the black community quickly realized the ideological limitations of the ethnicity paradigm in addressing racial inequality. Assimilation was no longer seen to be a feasible option for racial equality, and more collectivistic measures were sought. Omi and Winant observes “the great transformation” that facilitated the forging of a new collective racial identity involving the rearticulation of black collective subjectivity (1994:99). This process was reinforced by a new black politics that “linked traditional black cultural and religious themes with ideas and strategies of social movements around the world,” thus formulating a liberation theology that presented the freedom struggle as a collective moral obligation. This resonates with Durkheim’s description of the moral sentiments of the conscience collective:

We are aware of how much force a belief or sentiment may acquire merely because they are experienced within a single community of people [...] This is why
in large gatherings of people an emotion can assume such violence. It is because the strength with which it is produced in each individual consciousness is reciprocated in over other consciousness. […] If the state of feeling is strongly offended and if the offence is grave: the entire group attacked closes ranks in the face of danger and, in a manner of speaking, clings closer together. (Durkheim 1985:55-59)

The black community is thus united by an affective force that expresses itself as a collective anger for the racial injustices of the system. A new identity is formed through which individual survival strategies are subsumed by collective action and opposition. Thus, “the movements themselves could disintegrate, the policies for which they fought could be reversed, their leaders could be coopted or destroyed, but the racial subjectivity and self-awareness which they developed had taken permanent hold and no amount of repression or cooption could change that” (Omi and Winant 1994:97). The racial sentiments, black pride and collective obligations that continue to define the fictive kinship system of black peer groups in public schools are evidence of this.

4.2 On Multicultural Education Reform

In the midst of their disillusionment with assimilation in the late 1960s, black-Americans “began to question seriously not only its desirability but also its latent function, as a tool that dominant ethnic groups used to rationalize and maintain their power to keep victimized ethnic groups content with the status quo and yet striving to attain implausible goals” (Banks 2006:100). Ethnic minority leaders began to attack the
assimilationist ideology to shape a pluralist ideology that was more reflective of their social, economic, political, and educational aspirations. Since pluralism maintains that “assimilationist claims about individual opportunity in the United States are a myth and that US citizens are judged first as members of groups and only secondarily as individuals,” pluralists believe that education reform must concern itself with group advancement and equal outcomes (Banks 2006:100). The ideal curriculum would thus strengthen community ties and orient students towards the liberation of their ethnic groups. Furthermore, Black social scientists began to formulate new understandings of black culture as different, rather than deviant from middle-class white culture, having “viewed Black culture from the inside, saw it holistically, and described it as a viable and functional culture with tremendous strengths that enabled them to survive despite great odds” (Banks 2006:96). Thus, ethnic revival movements also sought radical and pluralistic education reform by which schools can begin to educate minority students for social change and “help them to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to help close the gap between our democratic ideals and societal realities” (Banks 2006:101). Such curriculum reforms emphasized a change in school attitudes, teacher expectations and course content to include the study of ethnic heroes and cultures. In response, educators implemented changes without careful planning and sufficient in-service training for teachers, which further prevented the school system from responding effectively to the problems of racism, class stratification, powerlessness and reforms necessarily to empower racial minority groups and individuals (Banks 2006:94).
The rise of the neoconservative education movement since the 1980s further undermined educational demands and efforts to achieve more equitable relations from prior decades. This abrupt return to a conservative agenda and ethnicity paradigm is as a result highly at odds with the collective sentiments of racial minority groups who have advanced beyond outdated ideologies of race and culture in the United States. The divisions within black communities due to class polarization were also deepening, “as those who were able to do so took advantage of new jobs and educational opportunities, while the majority of ghetto and barrio dwellers remained locked in poverty” (Omi and Winant 1994:105). Although the social cohesion and activism that had gained momentum during the prior decades were abruptly stymied by neoconservative policies and structural changes, the legacy of past social movements lives on in the consciousness of racial minority groups. Within discriminatory and monocultural education institutions, however, these differences will once again be processed into deficiencies legitimated by the new racism of American society. My study calls, in part, for a return to previously interrupted education reform agendas and the development of more equitable structural relations in public schools to resolve the problem of black underachievement and racial inequality. Given our increasingly diversified and complex configurations of society, a pluralistic structure is necessary to accommodate differences.

Section 5: Conclusion
At face-value, my project was an attempt to explain the black-white achievement gap that continues to perpetuate persistent inequalities in education and achievement outcomes between racial. Given the successful advancement of other immigrant minority groups relative to black-Americans and the pervasive explanations that continue to reduce differential performance levels to environmental and genetic factors which ultimately “blame the victim” for its faults, I was compelled to find alternative explanations that will generate less invidious, and hopefully more truthful, conclusions concerning the “culture” of blacks in America. In conceptualizing black students as cultural and social actors that share a common group understanding and race consciousness, I outline the ideologies and social mechanisms by which our predominantly assimilationist and monocultural public school systems come to process black cultural differences into group deficiencies. Furthermore, I analyze black actors in the context of their radical advances in the latter half of the twentieth century with the conviction that cultural localities are absolutely necessary for the collective existence of racial minority groups. In an increasingly diversified American society, biculturalism shapes the lived experiences and cultural dilemmas of a substantial portion of adolescents, and the processes and strategies by which they learn to traverse between separate but overlapping cultural spheres will certainly generate consequences for their later life. As cultural actors and individuals, bicultural students must necessarily handle multiple sets of normative commitments while navigating the challenges, constraints, and possibilities within their social environments. Black American students represent the most extreme cases of socio-economic disadvantage and bicultural conflict, and if one is
interested in measuring the racial and cultural climate of a society, one must logically come to study and understand the situation of the most marginalized and greatly disadvantaged group of all.

Thus, my characterization of the public school system as an institution and socialization system that is situated within an ethnicity paradigm is very telling of the ideological limitations that consequently shape its structures, policies, and orientation towards ethnic and racial minorities. Through the ethnographic works of anthropologists John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham, I further situation my study of black student underachievement within specific sites of low-income public schools, to derive central normative frameworks and factors that ultimately shape black student perceptions as well as their behaviors. The findings of Ogbu and Fordham reinforce my understanding that black students operate as bicultural and racial actors sharing the conscience collective of the black fictive-kinship system. Lastly, I conclude my study by pursuing the definition of “black culture” to its origins in the cultural identity movements that mobilized greater social movements which radically transformed American society for good. In consideration for the great contributions of black-Americans for the evolution of their society, I do not think it reasonable to reduce their “culture” to a set of oppositional attributes that discourage and hinder the American values of achievement, progress, and equal opportunity. Their obligation to sustain their racial integrity and group existence in the face of an institutional structure that devalues their moral, collective, and cultural worth in a racially stratified system, leaves me to conclude that assimilative school structures serve to be harmful and detrimental to the very individuals such institutions are
supposed to empower. As an observation of high-achieving black student individuals shows, the upward mobility of a few exceptional black individuals do not reflect or contribute to the collective gains of a disadvantaged group, and instead, only deepens divisions within black communities as well as generates racist sentiments within upwardly mobile blacks themselves. Racial and ethnic minority cultures remain to be essential parts of our social reality and contribute to the vitality of our nation. As long as institutions continue to process collectivistic orientations and group obligations into cultural deficiencies, black students will continue to fail in disproportionately high numbers due to the continued practice of covert discrimination, or what sociologist Mark Gould terms, the New Racism.
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