A Place to Stand to Full Size

The Black Community of Oak Bluffs

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Abstract

“A Place to Stand to Full Size: The Black Community of Oak Bluffs” relies on multiple sources and uses a mixed approach to study the evolution of this century-old summer community on the island of Martha’s Vineyard. Using scholarship that focuses on the black middle class, census and property tax data, mainstream histories, newspaper accounts, published memoirs and oral histories, the study tracks the growth of the black Oak Bluffs community from its nineteenth century origins to the present day. With the work of Karyn R. Lacy and Elijah Anderson providing the guiding insights for the analysis, the thesis uses the author’s sixty years of personal history in the community to explore key issues facing the black middle class and its more affluent contemporaries, as these groups navigate the troubled intersection of race and class in America.

The work uses auto-ethnography to examine the issues of assimilation, upward mobility, and racial authenticity in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as more contemporary concerns such as property ownership status, and asset retention. The study concludes with an analysis of black Oak Bluffs as a cultural symbol: an iconic counterweight to the mainstream racial stereotypes that still define and restrict African Americans today.
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Chapter 1: Introduction & Literature Review

Introduction

Oak Bluffs Massachusetts on the island of Martha’s Vineyard, and the African Americans who spend summer vacations there, are a place and a community I have known my entire life. That knowing is based on childhood memories and experiences and the stories told by family and friends. Growing up, I tried to place my personal experiences both on and off the island in a broader social context. How did I measure my senses of belonging and not belonging? How was my family like the rest of the community and how were we different? To what norms did we adhere and to what norms did we not? Through the years, I have introduced numerous people to this community: an act, I later discovered that has been repeated by the black summer residents of Oak Bluffs for generations. I have told its history informally and described the changes I have seen in the past sixty years. The purpose of this thesis is to look at the African American community of Oak Bluffs in a more systematic way; to understand its meaning to the middle-class and affluent African Americans who go there, and to understand, through time and space, how it became, as Dorothy West, life-long Oak Bluffs resident, Harlem Renaissance writer, and unofficial chronicler of the community, said in her collection *The Richer, the Poorer*, “A place where they could stand to full size.” (West, 1995, p.240)

The black community of Oak Bluffs, in broader terms, embodies the intersection of caste and class for Blacks in American society. We see, over time, how increased economic opportunity shifts identity from one based on race to one based on income; and how racial identity, defined and restricted by the mainstream culture manifests itself in interracial interactions within and across class. We also learn how class differences impact racial identity construction and the desire for racial authenticity in an increasingly integrated society. When looking at African Americans in the first decades of the twenty-first century we see a change in focus from issues of upward mobility and status creation to issues of
status reproduction, the preservation of wealth through property and the emergence of true black wealth. All these issues can be addressed in the study of one place and one family. What comes from studying the black community of Oak Bluffs is to see the journey of a people out of caste and into class. It is a journey of escape from the confinement of racial stereotypes into the freedom of a multi-faceted, self-constructed identity. In Oak Bluffs, it is a liberation achieved through the acquisition of property — vacation homes to be exact — and a differentiation from a negative iconic identity that is not achieved without considerable personal cost. In the end, the black community of Oak Bluffs has created its own iconic identity. One that resonates across the limits of race and class and now is both a symbol and a destination. It is here one comes to see and celebrate African Americans on the rise, standing at full size; living the American dream.

This study relies on multiple sources, and uses a mixed method approach: scholarship that focuses on the black middle class, census data, mainstream histories and newspaper accounts. I consulted several works that specifically deal with the history of the African American community there, published memoirs, and oral histories from long-time residents. For a more contemporary perspective I have consulted Oak Bluffs public records, where information on recent construction, home ownership, and current property values all provide valuable insights to the economic dynamics of the community. To confirm some of the details from the more recent past, I have interviewed neighbors, seeking both corroboration and insight. Last, I have used my own recollections of people and events, my interactions with neighbors and family members, and my own family’s personal history to explore the forces of change that have shaped the black community of Oak Bluffs and those who go there. This has been a deeply personal journey that has caused me to confront various issues, from my parents’ life choices and estrangement from the black middle class, to my own belated embrace of its values and practices. From its beginnings at the start of the twentieth century, Oak Bluffs has been a sanctuary for African Americans of means. They have come here to heal and recharge, to be themselves without the scrutiny
of the white gaze, and to transmit their values to the next generation. Perhaps I needed to become an
adult and a parent myself, in a world that still questions our value, to appreciate fully its informal mode
of nurturing. Despite all the economic changes on and off the island, this nurturing has remained a
constant for over a century. The duration of each family’s stay may have changed and the price of home
ownership may now be out of reach most the middle-class families, but the beach is still free, the
porches are still within talking distance of the street, and the children can still walk into town on their
own. This is the story of my Oak Bluffs, my family, and in the broadest sense, my people.
Literature Review

Since the black community of Oak Bluffs has always been defined in terms of its affluent status, the history of the black middle class is a good jumping off point. Works on the subject date back as early as *The Philadelphia Negro* by W.E.B. DuBois published in 1899. Two mid-twentieth century works by E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*, originally published in 1939, and *Black Bourgeoisie*, published in 1957, in many ways shaped how scholars looked at middle class African Americans until the mid-1960s. Scholarship that is more relevant to this study is more contemporary. *Black Picket Fences* by Mary Pattillo-McCoy, published in 1999 and *Blue-Chip Black* by Karyn R. Lacy, published in 2007, reframe the discussion of Black American leisure in more modern terms, with Lacy, focusing on the differences between the lower middle class and what she calls the elite middle class. The work of Elijah Anderson, both in his book *The Cosmopolitan Canopy*, published in 2011 and in his essay “The White Space” published in 2014, add valuable insight into the interracial interactions of blacks with middle-class status.

A valuable source outside of the scholarly and statistical arena, with particular relevance to the black community of Oak Bluffs, is the work of Dorothy West, a Harlem Renaissance writer who lived fulltime in Oak Bluffs since the mid-1940s until her death in 1998. Her insights and commentary on the position of the black middle class in mainstream society and the day-to-day activities of the Black Oak Bluffs community can be found both in her published fiction and non-fiction work and in the column she wrote for many decades in the “Vineyard Gazette”.

Among the scholars who have written about the black middle class, there is surprising agreement on its origins, its historical development, and its definition. DuBois, Frazier, Pattillo-McCoy and Lacy all state that the black middle class was first defined by color and then occupation. It is only in the most recent work of Lacy, that income takes prominence. All four of these scholars, along with Anderson and West,
agree that those outside the black community see little, if any, class differentiation among African Americans. As DuBois states back in 1899:

There is always a strong tendency on the part of the community to consider the Negroes as composing one practically homogeneous mass. The view has of course a certain justification: the people of Negro descent in this land have had a common history, suffer to-day common disabilities, and contribute to one general set of social problems. And yet if the foregoing statistics have emphasized only one fact it is the wide variations in antecedents wealth, intelligence and general efficiency have already differentiated within this group. (DuBois, p309)

DuBois goes on to break down his Philadelphia subjects into four classes, or to use his term: “grades”. Just as in his earlier comment, DuBois brings into play certain criteria of his time and world view that a modern researcher would reject in trying to distinguish the middle class such as intelligence when he defines his categories. His “grades” are as follows:

Grade 1. Families of undoubted respectability earning sufficient income to live well; not engaged in menial service of any kind; the wife engaged in no occupation save that of a housewife, except in the few cases where she had special employment at home. The children not compelled to be breadwinners, but found in school; the family living in a well-kept home.

Grade 2. The respectable working-class; in comfortable circumstances, with a good home, and having steady remunerative work. The younger children in school.

Grade 3. The poor; persons not earning enough to keep them at all times above want; honest, although not always energetic or thrifty, and no touch of gross immorality or crime. Including the very poor and the poor.

Grade 4. The lowest class of criminals, prostitutes and loafers; the “submerged tenth.” (p.310)
While DuBois refers to earning power in his descriptions, it is occupation that determines one’s placement. What DuBois used to further categorize black Philadelphians were their occupations: “in learned professions, conducting business on their own account, in skilled trades, clerks, etc., laborers, better class, laborers, common class, servants, and miscellaneous.” (p.100) DuBois identifies “…perhaps 3,000 Negroes in the city, who form the aristocracy of the Negro population” (p. 316) and denotes their historical origins, “They are largely Philadelphia born, and being descended from the house-servant class, contain many mulattoes.” (p.318)

E. Franklin Frazier, in The Negro Family in the United States, similarly uses occupation to define class status: “The middle-class group, whose family life we are considering, includes, in addition to those in business enterprises and white-collar occupations, men and women engaged in professional pursuits and employed in responsible positions of public service.” (p318) More specifically, Frazier defines the middles class occupationally as follows: “…we shall consider only those having the following employment status: professional and semi-professional, proprietors and managers, and clerical workers.” (p318) When discussing historical origin, Frazier also defines the black middle class in terms of color, “Physically, the middle class shows that it is comprised largely of men and women of mixed ancestry.” (p.319) In Black Bourgeoisie, Frazier also traces color origins (p.20), but states why occupation, rather than income should be used as his mid-century criteria for inclusion. Frazier uses data from the 1950 census to point out the irrelevance of income as a useful point of definition. Frazier, as he had done in his earlier work, chooses to define what he calls the black bourgeoisie by occupation. The 16.3 percent of employed African American male adults that meet his definition come from the following occupational groups: professional and technical; managers, officials and proprietors; clerical, sales, etc.; and craftsmen, foremen, etc. (p.47) It is when looking at income distribution from the same year that Frazier concludes that income provides little insight and even less differentiation. Frazier notes that, “In 1949 the median income of Negro families in the United States was $1,665 or 51 per cent
of the median income of white families which was $3,232. Only 16 per cent of Negro families as compared with 55 per cent of white families had incomes of $3,000 or more." (50-51) For Frazier, income variation at the higher levels is not a meaningful distinction. The number of families among his black bourgeoisie is so small above $3,000 per year and so flat as to be inconsequential. Frazier concludes,

For the country as a whole, the incomes of members of the black bourgeoisie range between $2,000 and $2,500 and upwards. The majority of their incomes do not amount to as much as $4,000. In fact, scarcely more than one per cent of all Negroes in the country have an income amounting to $4,000 and only one-half of one per cent of them have an income of $5,000 or more (p.52)

The lack of income differentiation becomes a key point for Frazier, and it is his jumping off point for his harsh critique of the black bourgeoisie. Frazier invokes both color and class in The Negro Family in the United States with his chapter titles: “The Brown Middle Class” and “The Black Proletariat” and in the very title of Black Bourgeoisie, with an analysis in both books that stresses the negative impact of the break from the black masses. In the introduction to Black Bourgeoisie, Frazier asserts,

Lacking a cultural tradition and rejecting identification with the Negro masses on the one hand, and suffering from the contempt of the white world on the other, the black bourgeoisie has developed a deep-seated inferiority complex. In order to compensate for this feeling of inferiority, the black bourgeoisie has created in its isolation what might be described as a world of make believe in which it attempts to escape the disdain of whites and fulfil its wish for status in American life (p.24-25).

In this world of make believe, Frazier states, “… the members of the black bourgeoisie in the United States seem to be in the process of becoming NOBODY.” (p.26) What drives this view for Frazier is two-
fold. First is an over-riding belief in the pathology of racial discrimination and segregation. Second is a belief in a Marxist definition of class, where the degree of economic separation between the black middle class and the black masses does not support the degree of separation in lifestyle and values. The actions of the black middle class are a sham because, “Despite the dreams of Negro leaders at the turn of the century that Negro businessmen would become organizers of big industries and large financial undertakings, Negroes have not become captains of industry nor even managers of large corporations.” (p.43) As many other critics of his generation argued, the pathology of racism and what Frazier calls “European capitalism” make the black middle class by definition, pathological. The institutions and values developed by those suffering from the disease could not be viewed as anything but sick. While the pathological analysis may highlight the injustice, it does little or nothing to help or critically analyze those suffering from the disease. Frazier’s work and analysis permeate much of the thought, both popular and academic, about the black middle class from the middle of the mid-fifties on. In popular culture the derogatory name “bourgie” and its connotation of elitism lives on. For people like my parents, who were both part of the post-war black intelligentsia, the absorption of Frazier’s views distanced them from the values and behavior of their parents’ generation and isolated the generation of their children as well.

Mary Pattillo-McCoy, like the scholars of earlier generations, cites the color origins of the black middle class. Carrying on the argument made by Frazier, in reference to income, Pattillo-McCoy comments, “Because most African Americans were economically poor until relatively recently, blacks used changing criteria to make status distinctions.” (p.15) As to color within the black middle class, Pattillo-McCoy notes that, “House servants’ sustained and close contact with the white upper class allowed for direct experiential knowledge of white lifestyles. These ‘mulatto’ house and skilled slaves, along with a disproportionally mixed-race group of free Negroes, constituted the ‘old black elite’ after emancipation and Reconstruction.” (p.16) She goes on to add, “The first black middle class was defined by its
phenotypical, spatial, and cultural proximity to the white upper class.” (16) Like her predecessors, Pattillo-McCoy still uses occupation to define the middle class. She uses similar occupational categories: professionals or semi-professionals; business owners, managers or officials, sales and clerical workers; but removes the craftsmen and foremen who were included in earlier analyses.

Pattillo-McCoy goes on to define a specific differentiation within the entrepreneurial segment distinguishing those who earned a living through service to whites, and those who served the all-black ghettos. (p.16) For Pattillo-McCoy, “The new racial ghetto formed the foundation upon which a new black middle class could flourish, one composed of ‘ghetto entrepreneurs.’” (p.17) This distinction takes on particular relevance in the context of the black community of Oak Bluffs when looking at the conflict between the first wave, who were entrepreneurs serving whites, and the second wave, who had a black clientele. The work of Pattillo-McCoy also brings into focus the post-World War II growth of the black middle class. She recognizes, “The unprecedented economic growth and prosperity after World War II, along with the social and political pressures of the civil rights movement, greatly expanded the black middle class in the 1950s and 1960s.” (p.17-18) In looking at the post-war advances made by the black middle class, Pattillo-McCoy explores the theory promoted by William Julius Wilson, that “…the African American was splitting in two.” (p.19)

Wilson saw the growth in high-wage employment and the rise of political liberalism as fueling the diminution of race as a factor in the stratification process. The life chances of blacks were becoming more dependent on their class position. African Americans with a college education were positioned to take advantage of jobs in a service-producing economy – jobs in trade and finance, public management, and social services. (p.20)

For Pattillo-McCoy and the Chicago community she studied, race still trumps class. Through her study of Groveland, she sees growing threats to the growth and survivability of the black middle class in the
1970s and 1980s. (p.20) For her, “The expansion of the black middle class in the 1950s, 1960s and very early in the 1970s came to a halt in the last two-and-a-half decades of the twentieth century. The generations that followed Groveland’s African American pioneer settlers have found it progressively more difficult to match what their parents amassed in the days of plenty.” (p.202)

In Patillo-McCoy’s view two factors have put the black middle class at risk. One the one hand, she sees a black middle class where “…higher-paid professionals and executives do not predominate as they do among the white middle class. Instead, office workers, sales people, and technical consultants – all lower-middle class jobs – make up the majority of black middle-class workers.” (p.202) On the other hand, as a result of racial segregation in housing, middle-class blacks live in close proximity to the black poor. According to Pattillo-McCoy, “As the geographic span of high-poverty areas has expanded since the 1970s, they continue to push into nearby black middle-class neighborhoods.” (p.203) How Pattillo-McCoy’s work impacts the study of the black community of Oak Bluffs is greatly influenced by those two factors, and to a large extent explains how that community was shielded from its effects. First, as an island summer community with no sizable year-round African American population of any kind, the Oak Bluffs community has no proximity to the black poor. Second, during the same period of economic decline outlined by Pattillo-McCoy after the mid-1970s, the size and vitality of the Oak Bluffs community did not suffer as did her Groveland neighborhood. While individual families underwent the hardships she associates with the younger generation trying to maintain their economic status, the Oak Bluffs community did not become distressed. Instead real estate values soared. Pattillo-McCoy’s post-World War II generation of owners are replaced in Oak Bluffs by a whole new class. Karyn R. Lacy calls them the elite black middle class. I prefer to call them the black affluent.

That brings us to the work of Karyn R. Lacy and Elijah Anderson, whose insights provide the theoretical framework on which this thesis is built. Both Lacy and Anderson examine the tensions experienced at
the intersection of race and class. For Lacy, much of her analysis explores the mechanisms used by ascending African Americans to differentiate themselves from the black masses. For Anderson, the struggle engaged-in by these ascenders is to escape the racial stereotypes imposed on them by the white mainstream culture. Let us first, look at the work of Lacy in greater detail and then consider the work of Anderson.

Karyn R. Lacy presents a nuanced view of the black middle class by first differentiating between those she classifies as lower-middle class and those she classifies as elite-middle class. She then turns her focus to several other aspects of the black-middle class experience that are of particular relevance to the study of the black community of Oak Bluffs. Lacy spends much of *Blue-Chip Black* unpacking identity construction, the psychological costs of what she calls “boundary work,” and the process of status reproduction. When dealing with the differentiation within the black middle class, Lacy sees income as finally becoming the key determinant. She, like Patillo-McCoy, describes the historical origins of the black middle class as a progression from color to occupation. In describing the black middle class prior to World War I, Lacy notes, “We tend to think of class structure during this early period in terms of only two groups: the predominantly mulatto elite, and everyone else.” (p. 24) Lacy also sees a new middle class rising, resulting from the provision of services to the segregated black communities spawned by the Great Migration. Lacy observes that, “Their occupations ranged from doctors, to ministers, to teachers, to insurance agents to funeral directors, services that northern whites refused to provide to black clientele.” (p.25) Along with occupation, Lacy sees educational attainment as a significant marker, and like Frazier, cites segregation as the determining factor depressing black middle-class income. Lacy states, “Here again one’s position within the black middle class was not based on income, since black professionals earned substantially less working in the segregated black community than their white counterparts did working in mainstream society, but on the status that education conferred.” (p.29)
The turning point for Lacy and other scholars comes in the mid-1960s: “In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, federal policy that barred discrimination in employment or education on the basis of race or gender, a ‘real’ black middle class began to evolve – meaning simply that with greater access to both education and white collar jobs, more blacks gradually achieved a middle-class status closely aligned with conventional indicators of class position.” (p.30) As a result of this transformation of opportunity beginning in the mid-1960s, Lacy differentiates distinct segments within the black middle class, separating the lower-middle class from an elite-middle class. Using data from the 2000 census, Lacy defines the lower-middle class as individuals with incomes between $30,000 and $49,999 per year. (p.3) This lower-middle class constitutes 65 percent of the black middle class. The remaining 35 percent, where individual income is above $50,000, is the focus of her work. (Lacy, p.3)

For Lacy, the top 35 percent goes about public identity construction through two kinds of “boundary work.” Through exclusionary boundary work, Lacy’s elite black middle class subjects engage in behaviors to separate themselves for lower-class stereotypes. Lacy observes that, “Washington area middle-class blacks are firm in their belief that it is possible to minimize the probability of encountering racial discrimination if they can successfully convey their middle-class status to white strangers. To accomplish this feat, her respondents attempt to erect exclusionary boundaries against a bundle of stereotypes commonly associated with lower-class blacks.” (p.75) Lacy’s subjects are also engaged in inclusionary boundary work ‘...in order to blur distinctions between themselves and white members of the middle class by emphasizing area of consensus and shared experience.” (p.75)

While both of these behaviors help her subjects navigate mainstream society, both come at a cost. The performance aspect of both of these behaviors takes energy and, she argues, creates internal doubts fort her subjects where they begin to question their own authenticity. Lacy concludes, “The experience of middle-class blacks in my study suggest that those who actively correct the misapprehensions of
white strangers reduce the likelihood of discriminatory treatment. This invocation of public identity is a deliberate, conscious act – one that entails psychological costs as well as rewards.” (p.73) Safe spaces, whether they be the predominantly black-middle class neighborhoods Lacy describes, or a summer community like Oak Bluffs with a sizable back middle-class population, provides the top 35 percent with a refuge from constant performance behaviors. Lacy observes, “Through their deliberate and frequent interactions in black spaces, members of the black middle class construct and maintain black racial identities.” Achieving what she calls “strategic assimilation.” (p.151) For those in the black community of Oak Bluffs the notion that here one can safely engage in authentic black behavior without the need for boundary work, continues to be a dominant theme.

For Lacy’s subjects, and by extension the black community of Oak Bluffs, creating a safe space that provides a break from their constructed public identities dominates both child-rearing and status reproduction. Lacy notes,

The middle-class blacks in this study give considerable thought to nurturing black racial identities and to maintaining connections to the black world, which is intriguing because it involves reconciling a desire for racial integration with a perceived need for sustaining racially distinct spaces. On the one hand, these parents seek for themselves and their children the option of attending a white college or university, working in a predominantly white occupational category, or living in a majority-white neighborhood. On the other hand, they express concern that complete immersion in the white world will subject their children to racial discrimination, alienate them from the larger black community and generate nagging doubts about their racial identity and black authenticity. For these reasons, retaining ties to the black world emerges as a central preoccupation among these blacks. (p.152)
When Lacy describes the racial identity process in the predominantly black neighborhoods in her study she stresses how, “In such an environment, racial identity is nurtured with little or no conscious effort—being black becomes something that you are rather than something that you do.” (p.166) The children raised in these predominantly black neighborhoods, according to Lacy “… develop an insider’s sense of what it means to be black as they learn cultural cues through interaction with black neighbors.” (p.167) Through Lacy, one can see the dual purpose of refuge and informal racial construction site play out over the decades with increasing relevance as more of its members spend more and more of their time climbing in the mainstream.

While Karyn Lacy looks at the behaviors of members of the black middle class in terms of the strategies they use to navigate mainstream society, Elijah Anderson explores how mainstream society interacts with them. Conceptually, Anderson focuses on the spaces where cross-racial interactions occur. In his essay “The White Space,” Anderson identifies two clearly demarked spaces: the black space and the white space, and describes a third dynamic one that he calls the cosmopolitan canopy. (p.11) This third space, according to Anderson, “…exists as a diverse island of civility located in a virtual sea of racial segregation.” (p.11) For Anderson, the navigation done by African Americans, including members of the middle class is not matched by a similar navigation done by whites. As Anderson notes, “While white people usually avoid black space, black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence.” (p.11) All three of Anderson’s spaces manifest themselves in the context of Oak Bluffs, particularly as the negative perception of black space bleeds into the other two. Anderson describes the black space as being defined symbolically by mainstream white society as the black ghetto. According to Anderson,

Here the ghetto becomes intensely more iconic, symbolized as a distressed place to which blacks have been relegated to live apart from the larger society, thereby encouraging a low
opinion of blacks as a racial category. Thus not only does the physical ghetto persist, but it also
has become a highly negative icon in American society and culture, serving increasingly as a
touchstone for prejudice, a profound source of stereotypes and rationalization for
discrimination against black people in general. (p.13)

Within the black community, this “iconic ghetto” generates the exclusionary boundary behavior Lacy
describes, and in the context of Oak Bluffs, illuminates the behaviors of the established black groups to
each new wave of visitors. While Lacy’s work in predominantly black middle-class communities reveals
much about the behaviors of the black community of Oak Bluffs, Oak Bluffs is not predominantly black.
Despite a strong and historic presence, the black community, in my observation, has never exceeded 30
to 35 percent of the total Oak Bluffs population, making it an ideal place to understand and test
Anderson’s cosmopolitan construct.

In his book The Cosmopolitan Canopy, Anderson posits a psychological oasis different from the one
described by Lacy. Under Anderson’s “canopy” the safety created is “… peculiar in that people of
diverse backgrounds feel they have a right to be there.” (p. 278-279) Anderson’s insights into shared
negotiated space aid our understanding of the physical, as well as psychic journey to Oak Bluffs.
Anderson’s sense of the canopy gives us the lens to look at that journey from the ferry line, to the snack
bar on the boat, to the walk into town.

Another touchstone for my analysis of the black community of Oak Bluffs comes from looking at the
writings of Dorothy West. The importance of the writer Dorothy West to any study of the black
community of Oak Bluffs comes not only from her nearly ninety years of personal experience, but from
the issues of class and race that dominate her work. As noted by Cherene Sherrard-Johnson in her book,
Dorothy West’s Paradise: A Biography of Race and Color:
Studying Dorothy West helps me to answer a slew of provocative questions: How did a small number of African Americans find a measure of success, equality and psychological freedom in the town of Oak Bluffs on the island of Martha’s Vineyard? How is that space representative of the anxieties and advantages of upper-class and elite black Americans? What is the cost? And who bears the cost? (p.2)

Sherrard-Johnson looks at West and the real and created worlds she records from a literary perspective. Looking at what West records and how she records it reveals her to be, not only an observer of the black Oak Bluffs community, but to be one of its most revealing respondents.

In their book *The Dorothy West Martha’s Vineyard: Stories and Reminiscences by Dorothy West Writing in the Vienyard Gazette*, James Robert Saunders and Renae Nadine Shackelford write of West’s long connection to the black community of Oak Bluffs. Dorothy West came to Oak Bluffs as a child, first vacationing there in the summer of 1908 (Saunders & Shackelford, p. 3). She grew up in the Boston suburb of Brookline, where her father, Isaac West owned a whole sale fruit company (p. 5). Sherrard-Johnson describes West’s father as the “black banana king” of Boston. For Isaac, according to Saunders and Shackelford, “Though his second home was on the Vineyard, he himself found the island boring, and left the matter of experiencing its joys to his wife and daughter while he stayed in Boston tending to his thriving commercial enterprise.” (p.5-6) West was also one of the youngest writers to be considered to be part of the Harlem Renaissance, arriving in Harlem at the age of nineteen in 1926 (Sherrard-Johnson, p.2), after the publication of her short story “The Typewriter” in the journal “Opportunity” (p.3). She then edited two literary magazines, “The Challenge” and “The New Challenge”, the second of which she co-edited with Richard Wright, placing her in the more socially conscious culture of the 1930s (p.4).

After a trip to the Soviet Union with other black writers in 1932, and a brief career as a welfare case
worker in New York City, West returns to live fulltime in Oak Bluffs in 1945 (p.3). Saunders and Shackelford describe West’s move back to Oak Bluffs and its meaning to her as follows:

In the mid-1940s when she returned to live permanently, she was in essence returning to her childhood roots, her spiritual birthplace, and she was willing to work at almost any occupation to sustain herself in this locale. She had no hesitation at all in taking a job as a cashier at the Harborside Inn, and then becoming a file clerk for the “Vineyard Gazette” before she eventually began writing a regular column for the same newspaper. (p.6)

West’s first novel, *The Living is Easy*, was published shortly after her return to Oak Bluffs in 1948 (Sherrard-Johnson p.124), while her second novel, *The Wedding*, is published in 1995 (p.5).

Most important to the study of the black community of Oak Bluffs are the two columns West wrote for the “Vineyard Gazette:” “Cottager’s Corner” starting in 1967, and its successor, “Oak Bluffs”, which she wrote from 1973 until her death in 1993 (p.148). In those columns, West both recounted social minutiae and offered broad social commentary. As stated by Sherrard-Johnson, “... she chronicled and constructed a unique microcosm of the nation: the black colony on the island of Martha’s Vineyard.” (p.8) and “... played a key role promoting the island, particularly Oak Bluffs, as a space of exclusivity, respectability and interracial harmony. Whether it truly is such a place continues to be a matter of debate.” (p.10) Whether West is writing about a fishing tournament, a wedding, or a tennis event or writing in more general terms, she is a passionate defender of her race and class.
Chapter 2: Private Origins

The Fifties

Benchmarks  Summer Population of Martha’s Vineyard: 40,000
             Percent of African American Population in U.S. Over 25 Having Completed College: 2.9%
             Percent of African American Families with Income of $3,000+ per Year: 16%

(from the Vineyard Gazette and the U.S. Census)

The Drive

My experience of Oak Bluffs in the fifties would begin with a daytrip with my mother, Jeanne Curtis
Davis, from Princeton to Paterson, New Jersey to pick up my grandmother, Fannie Holland Curtis. Since
1956, she lived alone in the house where my mother grew up and where my late grandfather, Austin
Maurice Curtis had had his medical practice. My grandmother didn’t drive so it was our family’s job to
take her “up to the Bluffs” where she spent the entire summer. My mother would pick her up and bring
her back to Princeton to stay with us for a few days before the whole family – my father, my mother, my
older brother and I – would make the long drive to Woods Hole with my grandmother to catch the ferry
to Martha’s Vineyard.

In those days, before the development of the interstate highway system, the drive to Woods Hole,
Massachusetts was an all-day trip through New York and Southern New England, to catch the last ferry.
There was no Connecticut Turnpike, just the Merritt and Wilbur Cross Parkways with the tunnel though
West Rock in Hamden as the major landmark. There was no I-95 through Rhode Island. Instead there
was US 6 to Providence, Rhode Island and then US 44 through Taunton, Massachusetts. There was no
limited access highway to the Bourne Bridge. Instead there was Route 28 with its cranberry bogs and
wicker shops to Buzzards Bay. After packing the car, my father would always change into a suit and tie
before starting the drive.
My family was navigating the gap between the known world of home (in our case faculty housing on the Princeton University campus), and the known world of summer (Oak Bluffs). The world of home on the Princeton campus certainly met Elijah Andersons’ definition of a “white space” but with an important difference. In his essay of the same name in the “Journal of Race and Ethnicity” Anderson states,

In the absence of routine social contact between blacks and whites, stereotypes can rule perceptions, creating a situation that estranges blacks. In these circumstances, almost any unknown black person can experience social distance, especially a young black male – not because of his merit as a person but because of the color of his skin and what black skin has come to mean as others in the white space associate it with the iconic black ghetto. (Anderson p.13)

In Princeton, both in town and on campus, we were “known” black people. On the road, travelling to Woods Hole, we were not. In “The White Space” (2014) and in his book The Cosmopolitan Canopy (2001), Anderson sites dress as a primary means of overcoming what he calls “a black person’s deficit of credibility.” (2014, p13) He goes on to state, “This performance can be as deliberate as dressing well and speaking in an educated way or as simple as producing an ID or a driver’s license in situations in which this would never be demanded of whites.” (2014, p.13) In The Cosmopolitan Canopy he elaborates further, “Because color is still so powerful, when upper-class blacks dress casually, others do not distinguish them from their brothers and sisters.” (Anderson p230) Anderson’s observations, while more reflective of today, still inform my father’s choice of traveling attire.

The experience of arriving at the ferry terminal has not changed much in the past sixty years, despite the most obvious physical differences. In the fifties, the New Haven Railroad train from New York still ended at the ferry terminal dropping off working dads on Friday night. Now the railroad tracks are a bike trail and shuttle busses bring walk-on passengers to the boat from distant parking lots and Peter Pan busses
drop off vacationers from the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York and South Station in Boston. The steamers to Nantucket still left from Woods Hole as well, and one could still encounter folks going to that far more exclusive destination. The car line for Martha’s Vineyard was pretty much as it is today. Early in the morning, the cars had New England license plates, mostly from Massachusetts and Connecticut with a few from New Hampshire and Rhode Island. We only joined them if we missed the last boat the night before. Later in the day, when we normally arrived, more cars were from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, D.C., and beyond. As the roads got better in the sixties and seventies, cars from farther and farther away arrived in Woods Hole earlier and earlier, bringing occupants from as far away as Chicago.

There was a certain sameness to the cars and their occupants, but there were certain distinct differences. In the 1950s, the cars were full of families with kids’ bicycles either tied to the back or on the roof. The cars were completely loaded with suitcases, bedding, articles of furniture and food, lots of food, to avoid paying the inflated Vineyard prices. The moms and kids would pile out and head to the restrooms, while the dads would get on line to pick up the tickets. The car line was also the one place where all the Vineyard communities converged. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants headed to Edgartown, Jews headed to Chilmark, and Blacks headed to Oak Bluffs all shared the same space on the ferry line. It was, even then, what Anderson would call a “cosmopolitan canopy.” Anderson states, “Canopies are in essence pluralistic spaces where people engage one another in a spirit of civility, or even comity and good will.” (2001, p. xiv) Unlike the other groups, the blacks heading to Oak Bluffs were not going to a community in isolation. Other groups were always present. Census numbers do not track summer residence, so there is no official source on the percentage of blacks spending the summer in Oak Bluffs, but, by observation, I have never felt that it was greater than 35 percent of the total. For blacks in Oak Bluffs life was and is an extension of the ferry line, a cosmopolitan enclave with a strong and long-standing African American component.
Feeling the cool sea air at the terminal and anticipating a long dreamt-for vacation certainly helped to create this expansive mood. Everyone, after all, had something else important in common: all could afford to take a vacation on Martha’s Vineyard. Anderson continues:

Here racially, ethnically, and socially diverse peoples spend casual and purposeful time together, coming to know one another through what I call folk ethnography, a form of people watching that allows individuals informally to gather evidence in social interactions that supports their own viewpoints or transforms their commonsense understanding of social life. (2001, p. xv)

Starting as a small child, I too was gathering evidence. Observing people from backgrounds far different from my own and quite similar in other ways only occurred during summers in Oak Bluffs. I was developing my own commonsense understanding of multiple spaces: kids’ space, grandmother’s space, parents’ space, white space, black space, and the confusing cosmopolitan space of Oak Bluffs that was and still is far different from the American norm.

Grandmother’s Space

The house in Oak Bluffs was my grandmother’s house. My grandfather had gone there for only a couple of years before he died, but he still was a presence. He had turned the garage into a game room and it was still filled with smoking, drinking, and card playing paraphernalia, though all the Duplicate Bridge trophies he and my grandmother had won remained in the house in Paterson. The pieces I remember most are the porcelain ashtrays bearing their first names: Maurice and Fannie, and the electric cigarette case, where with the touch of a button a fresh cigarette would roll out of the box pre-lit so that the user never had to put down one’s cards. My mother described her father as essentially a man of leisure. The photos of him show a man holding the fish he had caught, or standing in fashionable period swimwear on a beach; sitting in some New York nightclub with Lou Costello and some poor prize fighter they had
invested in, or disembarking with my grandmother from a cruise ship in the Caribbean with the stunned white crewmembers looking on at this living contradiction to all that they knew about race and class in America. He had his private practice in his home office and did his rounds at the local hospital, but my mother did not think of his life as one dominated by work. I asked her why she hadn’t become a physician like her father and grandfather or like her childhood friends Jane and Barbara Wright, whose father, Louis T. Wright, was director of Harlem Hospital. She said that it wasn’t the academic rigor that dissuaded her – after all she loved mathematics -- it was the casual lifestyle of her father revolving around sports, fishing and cards that defined a physician’s life for her, and she wanted no part of it. My grandmother still played cards, but now she went to her club, The Cottagers, to play, rather than playing in the bar.

The Cottagers, I later learned, started in the mid-fifties as a collection of women like my grandmother who liked to play cards, but evolved over the next decade into black Oak Bluff’s signature institution. The Cottagers, Inc., according to their website,

... was formed in 1956 by a group of African American women homeowners on Martha’s Vineyard. The organization now has one-hundred women who are Vineyard homeowners and whose mission is to promote education, a sense of cultural pride and the value of service to the community for the people of the Island. The women of The Cottagers, Inc. are important role models, epitomizing the strength of women through philanthropic activities. The group fundraises all summer to financially support Island programs.

(www.cottagerscornermv.org/aboutus)

With Harlem Renaissance writer Dorothy West as one of the founding members, The Cottagers started meeting on porches (Hayden p. 14) and then moved its meetings to Shearer Cottage where the membership grew from 30 to 50, to its current limit of 100. (Hayden p.15) In 1968 they purchased the
old Oak Bluffs town hall on Pequot Avenue which was enroute between our house on Pennacook and the shops on Circuit Avenue, and renamed it “Cottager’s Corner” in 1969. (Hayden p.16) As Vineyard historian Arthur R. Railton describes them, “The Cottagers were an exclusive group: members had to be black, female, and owners of Oak Bluffs property.” (Railton p.380) These three characteristics defined the social hierarchy of black Oak Bluffs. Adelaide Cromwell also emphasizes the exclusivity of The Cottagers, “The formation of The Cottagers began the institutionalizing of group status giving some specificity as to who was or was not ‘in’.” (Cromwell p.21) Today, the plaque on the side of the building has dropped the word “homeowners” from the description but not from the membership requirements, as such markers of exclusivity create a negative impression with the general public. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson provides a trenchant description of the Cottagers and its members in her book Dorothy West’s Paradise: A Biography of Class and Color:

Founded by twelve women in 1956, many of whom were already members of national black women’s organizations and historically black sororities, the Cottagers developed into a specifically local group that emulated and diverged from the types of organizations that sparked the African American women’s club movement at the end of the nineteenth century. While the main motivation of the Cottagers is altruistic, the fact that West gives primacy to their social activities reveals how the “politics of respectability” were promoted and sustained by black women’s organizations, even those that kept the motto of the club movement – “lifting as we climb”—firmly in mind. (Sherrard-Johnson, p. 148)

It was the women in the Cottagers who tracked the community’s progress one family at a time, noting the new arrivals and assessing their value.

Every morning, except Sunday, my grandmother would get dressed up, put on her hat and gloves and walk down to Circuit Avenue. The trip was ostensibly to check for mail at the post office and to buy a
few groceries, but it was really to socialize with her friends and neighbors on the porches along the way. Having a mailbox was, itself, a social marker. If you had a post office box, you were someone who owns, who came every summer, and who stayed long enough to have your mail forwarded from your mainland address. You were an ongoing participant in the community and you had made a commitment to be a part of it. Later in the day, one of her friends might come by for a visit. Many of these women were also from Northern New Jersey, but not from Paterson itself. She knew them through a wide network of black social organizations. Most of the people in her set seemed to be the wives and widows of other black physicians. With only a small number of middle-class and affluent blacks in any one community, the network they shared was regional. I remember addressing Christmas cards to women in East Paterson, Bayonne, Passaic, the Oranges, and beyond. I still remember my astonishment when after hearing of the death of W.E.B. DuBois, it was not his leadership of the NAACP or his scholarship that my grandmother recalled, it was his skill as a bridge player. The focus while on Oak Bluffs was on leisure. The more serious activities were left on the mainland and to their younger selves. The more formal interactions took place in the afternoon either as lunches or late afternoon events before dinner. These gatherings were always in people’s homes, never in a restaurant. Helene Wareham, in Jill Nelson’s book *Finding Martha’s Vineyard*, describes it as follows: “People ask me, ‘What do you do there?’ I say nothing. Then they ask, ‘What do you mean by nothing?’ I tell them, ‘Well we meet at other people’s houses, we play cards, and we entertain one another.’” (Nelson p. 235)

In the fifties, it was a community defined by black female home owners who came up for the whole summer. Their children and grandchildren would come for a week or the whole summer, with husbands as transient participants in Oak Bluffs life. My next-door neighbor Skip Finley recalls, again in Nelson’s book, that as a child, “You never really noticed that it was an island of women and kids until you got older.” (Nelson p.201)
We brought my grandmother up in June, staying about a week, then my mother’s cousin, Humphrey Cornelius Patton III, and his family would stay with her for the month of July. Neil, as we called him, was an air traffic controller on Long Island and his wife Rose taught second grade in the New York City public schools. Neil had been a Tuskegee Airman, one of the black fighter pilots who trained at Tuskegee Institute. This first group of black aviators, all of them officers dealing with the segregated armed forces, were in the vanguard of integration in World War II. His way of negotiating the unknown space between Hempstead, Long Island and Woods Hole was to drive all night, catching the first ferry in the morning. When the Pattons left at the end of July, my family would arrive for the month of August, taking my grandmother back to Paterson after Labor Day.

The address for the house was 17 Pennacook Avenue; it was later changed to 13 when the town made the addresses reflect the number of houses, rather than the number of lots. My grandmother’s house, like one on the other side of the street, occupied two lots. The house across the street, number 18, was owned by Ruth Fisher, from Washington, DC. I never knew or heard about Mr. Fisher. All I knew was that Mrs. Fisher would come for the whole summer and run her house as a guest house, with the help of her son Charlie. It was through Mrs. Fisher that my grandparents found the house. Mrs. Fisher had been a student of my grandmother’s when Grandmother taught high school in Washington. When my grandparents were looking for a new place to “summer” in the early 1950’s, it was Ruth Fisher who told them about Oak Bluffs.

D.C. Roots

Before coming “up to the Bluffs,” my grandparents spent summers, along with my grandfather’s extended family at Arundel-on-the Bay, Maryland. According to Mark S. Foster in his article “In the Face of ‘Jim Crow’: Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel, and Outdoor Leisure, 1890-1945,”
Early in the twentieth century, numerous black resort areas sprouted up near eastern cities with relatively large black populations. In 1901 the distinguished writer Paul Dunbar described Arundel-on-the-Bay and Highland Beach [one and the same resort] close to Washington, DC, ‘...taken up entirely and almost owned by ourselves. The place [is] a beach nearly two miles long with good bathing facilities and with a forest behind it has been built up entirely by Negro capital.’ (1999, p136)

My grandfather was the son of Austin Maurice Curtis Sr., a prominent physician in Washington, DC. In the Medical History column of the July 1954 issue of the “Journal of the National Medical Association” Dr. W. Montague Cobb outlines Curtis Sr.’s career,

His medical career began in Chicago and developed to fruition in Washington, D.C. He was surgeon-in-chief of Freedmen’s Hospital from 1898 to 1902, professor of surgery at Howard University from 1928 to 1938, and president of the National Medical Association in 1911-12. Dr. Curtis was the first interne in the first voluntary Negro hospital and the first of his race to hold a staff appointment in a non-segregated hospital and a chair of surgery in an approved medical school. (p. 294)

In addition to my grandfather, his two brothers also became physicians. All spent summers at Arundel-on-the-Bay. Before my mother was born in 1918, my grandfather moved North to Paterson, along with his dentist brother-in-law where they both established private practices. They shared patients, most of whom were Italian-American truck farmers from the Amalfi peninsula, or “Amalfitani.” Why they made the move, I never knew, but my guess is the market for black physicians and dentists in D.C. was saturated and they wanted their own territory. That they served a predominantly white clientele in a community with few African Americans, seems, in retrospect, to be quite unusual. I met a several of these Amalfitani patients at a cousin’s wedding in the 1970s. They were now patients of the son who
took over the dental practice and were still so closely attached to their dentist that they would be invited to his son’s wedding. My mother would describe even longer car trips from Paterson, to Arundel, taking the car ferry across Delaware Bay, and sleeping in the car due to the lack of accommodations for blacks along the way.

The special position of the District, administered by the federal government, yet dominated by the segregated mores of the South, created special institutions such as Freedmen’s Hospital, Howard University, and Dunbar High School, all of which a distinct middle-class community of blacks not found elsewhere until the 1950s. My grandmother, Fannie also had roots in Washington, even though she was born in the lumber town of Red Bluff, California. Her father had been a printer for the local newspaper, and then got a job with the United States Mint in San Francisco, finally transferring to the Mint in Washington. The Department of Printing and Engraving had been a major employer of African Americans from Reconstruction until the institution of Jim Crow under Woodrow Wilson. Her mother was from a family of Seventh Day Adventists and I still remember some elderly cousins taking offense at the meat and alcohol my mother served at Fannie’s wake. Fannie Holland graduated from M Street High School, the predecessor to Dunbar High School, in the District, and then from Cornell University, graduating in 1911. Alison Stewart, in her book First Class: The Legacy of Dunbar, America’s First Black Public High School speaks to its position in the black community, “Dunbar had produced doctors, legal scholars, educators, and civil rights leaders...They were men and women who refused to let the disgusting practice of segregation limit their ambitions. Dunbar was a defining institution for African Americans of a certain age.” (2013, p. xi) Washington, D.C. provided the black middle class with unique opportunities to grow. Talk of Washington and Arundel remained an emotional touchpoint for my mother and her relatives, and other Washingtonians such as Ruth Fisher, Edward Brooke and Adelaide Cromwell had a presence in Oak Bluffs as well.
The Neighborhood

Pennacook Avenue runs between Sea View Avenue, which runs along Nantucket Sound, and Circuit Avenue, Oak Bluffs’ main commercial street. Grandmother’s house is one block in from the water at the corner of Waban Avenue. Our neighborhood runs from Ocean Park to the north, Circuit Avenue to the west, Waban Park to the south and the Sound to the east. It is one of five main summer neighborhoods in traditional Oak Bluffs. The other four are Hart Haven, which began as a family compound with its own little harbor; East Chop, another expensive white enclave on top of the highest bluff overlooking both Vineyard Haven harbor and the Sound; the Highlands, between East Chop and Oak Bluffs harbor; and the Methodist Campground. I learned recently that our neighborhood had a name. Adelaide M. Cromwell describes it in her article “The History of Oak Bluffs as a Popular Resort for Blacks” in the August 1984 issue of the local history journal “The Dukes County Intelligencer”: “The Highland residential section was gradually outgrown and summer people started buying homes closer to the beach and the center of town. They were now beginning to live in what had been called ‘The Gold Coast’, the area roughly between Circuit Avenue and the Sound, from Tuckernuck Avenue to Ocean Park.” (Cromwell p18) Since 1993, the neighborhood is part of the Copeland Plan District, named after Robert Morris Copeland, the landscape gardener who designed it. (1996, p1)

In the mid to late fifties, besides the two corner houses owned my grandmother and Ruth Fisher, African Americans owned maybe one third of the block. Even as a young child, it was apparent to me that the African Americans on the block seemed to have a lot more money than the white homeowners. The two other corner houses were owned by the Powells, African Americans who owned “The Amsterdam News” and the Palladinos who owned a gift shop on Circuit Avenue and one in Florida where they spent the winters. At the corner of Pequot and Waban on the corner across from the Finley’s, was the Pequot Inn. It was really just another one of the neighborhood houses with a dormitory-like addition next door.
One block over, on Tuckernuck at the corner of Seaview Avenue, was one of the last remaining resort hotels, The Sea View. It had fallen into disrepair, its porch and rocking chairs long gone, with the only remaining feature of note being the bar on the first floor. The Sea View was the most visible local landmark, used when giving directions to the house, and could be seen from as far away as State Beach. If you went the other direction, on Tuckernuck, past Waban Park, you would find the public tennis courts, where you could rent a court by the hour.

I knew best the families on the block who had kids: the Ritters, next to Ruth Fisher and the Vogles, on the same side of the street, but closer to the water. Both could be best described as white working-class families from Massachusetts. I don’t know how these families came to be there. Were they inheritors from before the Great Depression or were they recent acquirers, like my grandparents, taking advantage of a depressed market for summer homes? The Vogles were from Fall River, where Mr. Vogle was a carpenter. He was rarely there while the rest of the Vogles, his wife and nine children, were on the block for the whole summer. The Ritters were from Framingham. Mr. Ritter worked as a bartender at the Island Golf Club during the summer. Their daughter Andy was between my brother and me in age. The Palladinos often had their granddaughter stay with them for the summer, so when she was there she was part of the neighborhood group as well. Next door on Waban were the Finleys, an African American family from New York City. The father, Ewell Finley, owned his own engineering firm in New York City. His wife, Millie Finley and their kids were in Oak Bluffs all summer. The Finleys still own the house next door. Our interactions on the block were spontaneous and unstructured. We would play ball games in the street, have club meetings in my grandparents’ game room, and play on each other’s porches. We rarely went into the other homes and our parents’ only interaction was to say hello from the porch as they would walk past on their way downtown or, for the Vogles, on their way to mass on Sunday mornings. These were kid-driven relationships with little, if any parental involvement. The kids
were friends and the parents interacted with the kids but never with each other. The differences in race, class, and religion were part of the adult world, not kids’ world.

In addition to the kids who were our neighbors, my brother and I spent a lot of our time with three other sets of brothers: Christopher and Eric, who lived on the other side of Waban Park; Chip and Paul, who lived in the Highlands; and Neil and Evan who lived by the tennis courts. All three sets of brothers were from New York City. All three sets were African American. And all three sets had parents who were known to my parents and grandmother. The adults would socialize and the gatherings of the kids were less informal or spontaneous, in part because there needed to be some planning to get together, as they didn’t live on the block. With the greater distances involved, our play revolved around our bikes. We used them to go from house to house and as a major source of entertainment. Chip and Paul were the first kids I knew who had ten-speed bikes. It was one of the first markers of their urban sophistication.

The Beach

For various groups, at various times, the focus of the neighborhood was the water at the end of the block. Until the early 1970’s there wasn’t much of a beach, just a public pay beach to the left of the jetty with showers, a pier and a float; and a small beach a few yards wide at the end of the block below the sea wall to the right of the jetty where the Vogels and Andy Ritter, and other locals would swim mid­morning to early afternoon nearly every day. The Finleys did the same, except they preferred jumping off the pier and swimming to the float at the pay beach.

If you got up early enough, you would see older black people, either alone or in small groups walking back from the beach. These were members of the Polar Bears who would meet at the Inkwell every morning at 7:30 am to swim, exercise, and socialize, regardless of the weather, and then head back to
one of the members’ homes for coffee and breakfast. Membership in the Polar Bears was, and is, informal and unlike the Cottagers, they make no efforts towards exclusivity. In her 2012 study of the Polar bears, “Take Me to the Water” in the “Journal of Women & Aging”, Donna-Marie Peters traces the origin of the Polar Bears back to the mid-1940s (Peters, p217) and describes their inclusiveness as follows, “In a place that has been historically the vacation destination of the African American middle classes, where people are divided into renters and owners, residents versus vacationers, and by class, race, and home residential community, the Polar Bear social group becomes important to people, allowing them a chance to relate to others beyond these barriers, creating an inclusive community of health-conscious ‘like others.’” (Peters, p. 223) The ethos of inclusiveness modelled by the Polar Bears exists even among its members who are both Polar Bears and Cottagers.

There was a slightly wider beach to the right, that extended to a second jetty, with its own set of wooden stairs, opposite Waban Park that was frequented in the afternoon by African American adults. This was one of the two beaches referred to as “The Inkwell.” The other was at the far end of State Beach: a two-mile long stretch of beach on the sand bar between Oak Bluffs and Edgartown that separates Nantucket Sound from Sengekontacket Pond. Ruth Bonaparte describes both beaches in Finding Martha’s Vineyard:

All the people who lived around here, black and white, we’d all meet down at Town Beach, we didn’t know it as the Inkwell, in the morning. We’d go down to the beach around 10am and come back around twelve o’clock for lunch. Most of the time we didn’t go back, and if we did. We were finished with the beach by three or four.

The first we heard about the Inkwell was from the baby-sitter. So we walked down one day about four o’clock and it was a transformation. The beach that we had seen as a white and black beach was practically all black. There were people who had come down from the
Highlands, and we heard that they partied and slept late, so that's why they came to the beach in the afternoon. We brought the kids down early in the morning because we lived right here, all the families, white and black. A lot of people went down to State Beach, in Edgartown, at the third pole, that was the marker where you knew the black people would be, and they would meet down there to party. (Nelson p.189)

My Parent’s Space

Going to the beach for us meant going as a whole family. My mother would pack a lunch, and we would all get in the car, and go to State Beach. Initially, we went to the beach at the third pole, but it was mostly inhabited by adults. Kids, black or white, went on their own to the end of the block. One day I saw a man standing way out from shore with water only up to his knees. His relationship to the water (knee high) trumped for me any consideration of his race (white). He was on one of the sand bars and I wanted to go there. So we parked there at a spot before the second bridge, swam out to the sand bar, and my family continued to go there, swimming out to the sand bar each time, for the rest of my childhood.

Why did my family agree to stop at a spot before the second bridge? A lot of it had to do with how my family came to be on the Vineyard and who my father was. Even though we spent all of August on the Vineyard, we still felt, in many ways like guests in grandmother’s house. Princeton was on the outer limits of where African American families on the Vineyard were from. Dorothy West describes the geographic limits of the community:

The genesis of the black colony was no more than a dozen families. From that group of cottagers, the colony made slow but pervasive growth, drawing from Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and a scattering of other certifiable cities, excluding the Deep South.
cities because of an obsessive fear that the Deep South people might bring their attitudes of uncertainty to a place where blacks did not hang back to let whites go first. (West p.241)

My father and his family came from far outside the preferred territory. He grew up on the campus of what was then Hampton Institute, in Virginia, the son of the college’s business manager, Don A. Davis. It wasn’t the Deep South, but it wasn’t like the community in Northern New Jersey where my mother grew up. My father’s family was also college educated, with a long history at Hampton, dating back to the days of Fortress Monroe and contrabands during the Civil War. It was on what is now the Hampton campus, that the first contrabands came, and where the Freedman’s Bureau began. In his chapter on education in Black Bourgeoisie, E. Franklin Frazier singles out Fortress Monroe and Hampton for its role in founding black education after the Civil War. Frazier states,

As the Union armies advanced into the South, they were faced with the problem of caring for the slaves who fled from the plantation and sought refuge in the army camps. This problem appeared first when a Union army under General Butler occupied Fortress Monroe, Virginia. When slaves in the surrounding area learned that three Negro slaves, who had escaped from their masters and had entered the federal lines, were held as “contrabands”, they flocked in large numbers to the Union army. The men were put to work, food and shelter were provided for all the refugees, and the first day school in the South for Negroes was established by the American Missionary Association. (Frazier, p.61)

My father’s great grandfather, William Roscoe Davis was one of the earliest organizers of freedmen there, working for the American Missionary Association as a lecturer throughout the war, (Davis p.342) and, according to family lore, it was a letter he wrote to the AMA that resulted in the founding of Hampton Institute in 1868. (Davis p344) My father’s grandfather graduated from Hampton in 1872 (Davis p. 351) and of his father’s six brothers, one Collis, became a professor of Chemistry and later
provost at Hampton Institute. Another uncle was Arthur, a professor of English at Howard University (Davis p.355). A third uncle, John became a physician, having moved north to Harlem Hospital after graduating from Howard Medical School and interning at Freedman’s Hospital, a career path much the same as that of my mother’s family. (Davis p.354) My father said that neither he nor any of the other family members maintained much of a relationship with John once he moved North, nor were they in contact with the fourth uncle Harry. Harry, not mentioned in great uncle Arthur’s published account, was a Pullman porter. I only met great uncle Harry at my grandfather’s funeral.

I never met any childhood friends of my father. Perhaps he was repeating his uncle John’s northern move into the wider world, leaving the more limited segregated space of Tidewater Virginia behind him. He and his brother, Don Jr. had both gone north to college, with Don Jr. graduating from Dartmouth in 1935 and my father graduating in 1939. Don Jr. went back home to Hampton after graduation, becoming a bank officer for a black-owned savings and loan. The story goes that Don Jr. had been offered a position in one of the black insurance companies located in Durham, North Carolina, but marrying the owner’s daughter was a deal-breaker. Don Jr. and his family did come and visit us once in Oak Bluffs. We took them to State Beach at the third pole and they looked for other Virginians they might know. In retrospect, my father, and to a lesser extent, my mother, had absorbed E. Franklin Frazier’s mid-century view of the black middle class, with disdain for what they interpreted as a parochial intellectual life in places like Hampton, and embarrassment at the affectation of the leisurely lifestyle of Maurice in Paterson.

My father went to graduate school at the University of Chicago straight out of college, and then got his PhD and his first teaching job at NYU after the war. My parents met in college. They both went to Connecticut River colleges along the same train line: my father was at Dartmouth, while my mother was at Mount Holyoke. They were introduced by a friend of my mother’s, Adelaide Cromwell who went to
Smith with Jane Wright. While they dated in college, they became a couple during World War II when they both worked developing standardized tests for the U.S. Army. My father was an officer in the Adjutant General’s Corps stationed in Ft. Meade, Maryland, while my mother was employed as a staff psychologist in the Pentagon. That they were married in St. Philips Episcopal Church in Harlem, not back in her home town of Paterson, was a testament both to the regional nature of the Curtis’ social circle, and to the need to hold the ceremony in a socially prestigious setting. While my father was working on his PhD at NYU, my mother was earning an M.A. in educational psychology at Columbia Teacher’s College. Until his time at Yale in the seventies, the years at NYU, living in the Riverton at 135th & Madison was my father’s only emersion in the world of my mother and her family. By the mid-fifties, when we started coming to Oak Bluffs, we were living in faculty housing on the Princeton campus. My parents were not home owners on or off the Island, and my father did not teach during the summer.

Other members of the Oak Bluffs community followed a much different pattern. Our next-door neighbor Skip Finley remembers, “Growing up I spent the whole summer here with my two brothers, sister and Mom, generally from the second week in June when school let out until the day after Labor Day. My father came on weekends, he made the ‘Daddy Boat’.” (Nelson p 203)

With my father’s work schedule, and the sharing of the house with my cousins, we were neither in Oak Bluffs all summer nor only with my father on weekends. In the 1950s and early ‘60s wives and children of families from New York and Boston had Oak Bluffs to themselves from Sunday to Friday night. As another one of Jill Nelson’s respondents, Mildred Henderson remembers, “The men would come up on the weekends. Half of the children would be in pajamas, all the mothers would be at the ferry, meeting the Daddy Boat, that 10 or 10:45 boat.” (Nelson p188) She goes on to say, “It was like a vacation when the men weren’t here – you weren’t under the scrutiny of the husband – it was like another vacation.” (Nelson p188) This was a female-dominated world where husbands were peripheral.
Our family, on the other hand, was always together, always in a sense removed. Wherever we were, we went as a unit. Conditioned by our social isolation in the almost exclusively white communities where we lived, and rejecting, for the most part, the ways of the black middle class, we looked to each other for company and entertainment, with few expectations of what solace or support outsiders could provide.
Chapter 3: Public Origins: Oak Bluffs Before the Fifties

Methodist Beginnings

The spaces and institutions of Oak Bluffs in the fifties still resonate today even as they have changed over time. They did not begin with my family’s arrival, nor have they stayed the same. The Cottagers, the neighborhood, the Inkwell, State Beach, my family, all dominated my view of Oak Bluffs in the fifties. All changed in the passing years as new spaces and institutions rose in importance such as tennis, with its courts and annual tournament; Circuit Avenue with the constant search for a house party; golf at Farm Neck or Mink Meadows; bass fishing; and visiting patterns during the summer and beyond. While my time in Oak Bluffs begins in the 1950s, the presence of blacks in Oak Bluffs begins at the turn of the twentieth century, while the mainstream history of the town goes back half a century longer. The town of Oak Bluffs has a specific history that made it especially suited to become a resort for the black middle class. I always assumed that the town’s Methodist origins and that denomination’s involvement in the abolitionist movement drove the connection, but the Methodists are only tangentially related to its development.

Much of the writing on the mainstream history of Oak Bluffs comes from the work of Henry Beetle Hough in his work, *Martha’s Vineyard Summer Resort After 100 Years* (1966), and Chris Stoddard’s *A Centennial History of Cottage City* (2007), published by the Oak Bluffs Historical Society. Oddly, both works end at the turn of the 20th century, starting with the town’s beginnings as a Methodist campground through the real estate boom that followed the Civil War. Hough, who was the owner and editor of the *Vineyard Gazette* starting in 1920, tellingly doesn’t mention African Americans at all, while Stoddard, some forty years later, has a more expansive vision of what and who should be part of the
history. The historian who brings Oak Bluffs into the 20th century is Arthur R. Railton. His work, *The History of Martha's Vineyard: How We Got to Where We Are* (2006), not only extends the time period, but expands on what is told and who does the telling, relying extensively on the work of The Vineyard Oral History Center of the Martha’s Vineyard Historical Museum, curated by Linsey Lee.

These sources tell us that, from the beginning, Oak Bluffs was founded as a summer community. Its origins were tightly linked to the growth of Methodism in the 19th century. Its appeal as a religious gathering place then sparked its growth as a secular resort after the Civil War. Driven by the post war economic boom in the North, leisure was in the financial grasp of an emerging middle class. Eased by the rise of commercial steamships and railroads, Oak Bluffs became physically accessible as well. With its gingerbread houses feet from each other and from the street, Oak Bluffs embodies a specific Victorian middle-class world view of leisure and social interaction that still holds sway today.

Methodism, according to Stoddard, first appeared on Martha's Vineyard in 1787 with the arrival of Mr. John Saunders, an ex-slave from Virginia. (2007, p.28) Its interracial origins did not continue. Camp meetings were a key component of the practice and growth of the Methodist faith. The first camp meeting was held, again, according to Stoddard, in Kentucky in 1799. (2007, p. 290) The camp meeting, within the racial limitations of the late 18th and early 19th centuries,

...was at once a place where people of all classes could come together in an environment that would necessarily displace worldly preoccupations, creating an open space in the imagination vital to the conversion experience and allow it to take root in a shared experience of conviction and faith. (Stoddard p.30))

On August 24th, 1835 the Methodists held their first campmeeting on the Island. It was comprised of 9 tents in what came to be called the Wesleyan Grove. (Stoddard p.31) In 1841 there were 20 tents,
(Stoddard, p.32) and by 1842 there were 40 tents and 1,189 people, with 2,500 in attendance on Sunday. (Hough p.43) Stoddard notes the connection between Methodism and the rise of the abolitionist movement and its impact on the campground. In 1844, the year of the schism between southern and northern Methodists over slavery, he notes:

> At the close of the meeting, a collection was taken up for a woman from Brooklyn, New York who had moved to New Bedford. Her pastor made a plea for fifty dollars to bring her son out of slavery. Sixty dollars went into the hat, illustrating how the wind was blowing in these parts. (Stoddard p.34)

After one year in Westport Massachusetts, the campground returned to the Wesleyan Grove in 1846. (Stoddard p.35) The Campground continued to grow during the 1850’s. Stoddard reports 5,000 in attendance on the Sunday of 1853 and 180 tents in 1854. (p.36) Of these 180 tents,

> Thirty-six of these were the parish tents in the inner circle facing the preacher’s stand. The others were the smaller family tents and the large boarding tents which formed the outer perimeter. (Stoddard p.37)

Hough reports 200 tents in 1855 and 320 tents by 1858. (p.44) Stoddard adds that the original one-half acre for the campground had grown to nearly 15 acres with 12,000 attending on the Sunday. (p.38) The Grove, according to Hough, “...had become a tented community, with paths and ways, and an organized life.” (p.44) The rise of the family tent was key to the transition from temporary campground to permanent community. Hough goes on to say,

> Decentralization of the church societies into families, the ownership of family tents, and the gradual transformation of these tents into permanent frameworks or, at the last, into cottages,
was to bring about a community not only of camp meeting life but of summer homes. (Hough p.48)

The move towards permanence was punctuated in 1864 when the Meeting Association made two purchases, buying the 25 acres of the Wesleyan Grove for $1,515 and the right of way at the southern end of Squash Pond for $1,300. (Stoddard p.42)

Secular Development

1865 marks the start of the second phase of the history of Oak Bluffs: secular real estate development. That year, Erastus Carpenter bought land east of the Campground and formed, along with William S. Hill, the Oak Bluffs Land and Wharf Company (Railton p.242) As indicated in its name, real estate development needed first to have a wharf for the steamers to deliver potential customers and future homeowners. The wharf was completed in 1866 and a hotel was completed the following year. (Railton p.242) In addition, in 1872, the company also brought the railroad to Woods Hole on the Cape Cod, making land transportation, from Boston in particular, far easier.

The most important decision made by Carpenter and the Oaks Bluffs Land and Wharf Company was to hire Robert Morris Copeland to design the development. To quote Railton, “It may have been among the first planned residential communities in the United States.” (p.243) Carpenter added more open space and parkland. According to Railton,

Walking across the spaces that would become Ocean Park and Waban Park, he ordered the men to pull up the stakes. There would be no building there. At his insistence, more parks were added to the revised plan, a total of ten. The largest would be Ocean Park, at the head of the new wharf. An arriving tourist’s first view would be of an expanse of open parkland. Carpenter knew what would sell. (Railton p 243)
The parks and small lot sizes became signature features of the development of Oak Bluffs. These two features defined Oak Bluffs both physically and socially. Henry Beetle Hough speaks of the development in the following terms: “Most of the cottages were built for occupancy for a fleeting season, and they were built, not by the rich, but the middle classes whose delight this resort was.” (p. 124)

Hough goes on to quote a journalist in the florid language of the period,

> Here even domestic life itself is open as the daylight. The reserve and exclusion which distinguish English homes do not obtain in this rustic life. Sauntering through the leafy lanes in close proximity to invitingly open doors and windows, one sees families at their meals, tempting larder in plain sight, and the processes of cooking, ironing, and other household duties performed by the mothers or daughters themselves, with graceful unconsciousness and indifference to outside eyes. (Hough p130)

The early 1870’s brought a surge of development. For Railton, “These years were perhaps the most frenzied in Vineyard history, unequaled before or since. More than a thousand buildings were erected in the small area bounded on the east by Vineyard Sound, on the west by the campground, and on the south by Farm Pond.” (p. 248)

A list of non-resident tax payers in 1872 provided by Hough indicates where the summer homeowners were from. Of the over 900 listed, 842 were from New England, with 665 from Massachusetts and another 123 from Rhode Island. New York State was next with 43 non-resident tax payers. (Hough p.126) Secular development sparked two responses from the Campground Association. The first was a futile holding action where the Association built a seven-foot high picket fence around the 35 acres of the Campground. (Stoddard p.47) The second was to purchase more land. Railton reports that, “Campground folks were so concerned that they bought three hundred acres on the west side of Lake
Anthony, opposite the Oak Bluffs land. It would be a retreat for them should that company’s secularism become overpowering.” (p.243)

The land purchase, rather than stemming development, only increased it. According to Railton, the largest of the developers ended up being the campground itself. The Association sold the three hundred acres, forming a development called Vineyard Highlands. (p 248) A new development company: the Vineyard Grove Company, built another wharf and with its own hotel at the head. Railton elaborates, “There were now two large wharves only a few hundred yards apart, both extending onto the Sound. Steamboats from the mainland stopped first at Highland wharf to unload the ‘religious’ passengers and then proceeded to the Oak Bluffs wharf to let off the ‘seculars’.” (p. 248)

A former Methodist minister was hired by the new company to sell the lots on the Highlands to insure some differentiation between it and the Oak Bluffs Company. (Railton p.249) In keeping with this less secular image, some from the Campground moved their cottages to these newly purchased acres in the Highlands, bringing their cottages with them. (Stoddard p.48) With the Panic of 1873 and the economic crash that followed, Methodist participation in the development of the Highlands ended, but the religious orientation of the Highlands did not. According to Stoddard, “... that enterprise was rescued when the Baptist Vineyard Association appeared on the scene with plans for its own camp meeting.” (Stoddard p. 73) He goes on to describe the transition as follows:

The Highlands had been laid out like Wesleyan Grove in anticipation of the religious community’s need to escape Oak Bluffs. There was a central circle ringed with house lots along curving avenues, and so it was perfectly suited to the Baptists’ purpose. The first camp meeting was held in Wayland Grove in August 1875. (Stoddard p.74)
With a charter issued by the Massachusetts legislature on January 1, 1876 the arrangement with the Vineyard Grove Company became permanent. (Hough p.148) The Vineyard Grove Association would provide the Baptists with a free grant of land, free use of the Highland wharf and special privileges for Baptist clergymen and laymen. (Hough p. 148) Hough goes on to outline more details of the relationship:

...the company stipulated that a meeting of a week’s duration must be held each year, and this meeting was appointed to fall just prior to the Methodist gathering. The Baptist Association too won a tenth share of the proceeds of all sales of lots made by the company, and Baptist ministers were to be entitled to lots without charge, provided they built cottages within a year. (Hough p.148)

In 1880, the Baptist Association was joined on the Highlands by another institution when the Vineyard Grove Company granted land to the Martha’s Vineyard Summer Institute, the first summer school for teachers. (Hough p. 151) With the rise of the Highlands, Hough describes what he calls a “triple community, Oak Bluffs, campground, and Highlands.” (p.126)

**Black Arrivals**

Following the Baptists to the Highlands was Charles Shearer and his wife Henrietta. According to various sources, Charles Shearer bought land in the Highlands about 1900. (Dresser p.58) The Shearers were both graduates of what was then Hampton Institute. Charles was the head waiter at two Boston hotels: Yang’s Hotel and The Parker House. (Hayden p.54) He was a deacon at Tremont Temple Baptist Church, an integrated church founded in 1839. (Dresser p.62) Shearer’s granddaughter, Doris Pope Jackson recounts how the family first came to the Highlands in *More Vineyard Voices: Words, Faces and Voices of Island People*, a collection of oral histories compiled by Linsey Lee:
Well, my grandfather Shearer was introduced to the island by a friend and he heard of the religious background of the Island. He was an ardent Baptist. He came to the Island to go to religious meetings at the Baptist Tabernacle here in the Highlands. Most religious people came and pitched tents. My grandfather did not. That’s why he decided to try to buy property in Oak Bluffs. So in the late 1800’s they bought property in Oak Bluffs. Then in 1903 they bought their home overlooking the Baptist Temple Park, where he would come to revivals. This is where Shearer Cottage is located. (Lee p.130-131)

Henrietta opened a laundry, which she operated until her death in 1917. (Hayden p.55) Pope Jackson goes on to say:

“When my parents acquired the property, their friends started to come visit. Then they asked if they could come back. But friends found it difficult to acquire rooming on the Island, because the hotels were not open to blacks. And that is why my grandparents started Shearer Cottages, as a lodging house catering to African-Americans.” (Lee p. 131)

Dresser supports Jackson Pope’s story:

In 1912 they built and opened a twelve-room inn, which operated in conjunction with the laundry ... And it proved quite successful, since prominent African Americans who visited the Vineyard were denied rooms at the local hotels and inns because of their color. Shearer Cottage became the primary inn for African American visitors to the Vineyard. (Dresser p.64)

After Henrietta’s death, daughters Sadie and Lily closed the laundry and concentrated on the inn. (Hayden p.55) Hayden describes the inn as follows, emphasizing as did Dresser, its central role in the development of the Oak Bluffs black community: “They converted the long house into several rooms and renovated the large cottage by adding a kitchen and dining room and a tennis court. The L-shaped
porch for outside sitting and a top floor open balcony were also added. Shearer Cottage evolved into the premiere and historic vacation spot for African Americans.” (Hayden p.55)

The guest house became the primary institution through which African Americans were introduced to Oak Bluffs. While Shearer Cottage was the first and most well-known, Nelson notes that “…the accommodations and welcome extended by small guest houses, most of them established and run by black women, played a significant role in attracting and accommodating early African-American visitors to the island.” (Nelson, p.32) Nelson places the black-owned guest house in the context of early twentieth century America when she adds, “Most important, they provided a place for black Americans to stay at a time when accommodations were segregated.’ (Nelson p.32) The guest house was the first point of entry into the community and providing supplemental income for purchasers by then taking in guests themselves. The path to purchase and the connection to the economic sustainability of ownership through the guest house are both noted by Nelson. As to path to purchase she states, “Many of these visitors eventually purchased summer homes here that continue to be passed down through generations.” (Nelson p.33) As to sustainability, she adds, “In addition, many early homeowners quietly took in guests, both increasing their income during the summer months and providing a service. Some still do.” (Nelson, p.33)

The Shearers with their commercial enterprise were not the only African Americans to arrive in the Highlands in the early 1900’s. The families of the writer Dorothy West and the painter Lois Mailou Jones settled there as well. West’s family had been coming to Oak Bluffs for the summer since 1908. These early summer residents: the Shearers, the Jones, and the Wests, were all Bostonians. Adelaide M. Cromwell in her essay “The History of Oak Bluffs As a Popular Resort for Blacks” in the August 1984 issue of “The Dukes County Intelligencer” she describes the progression of summer visitors as follows, “This small and select group of successful Blacks knew each other in Boston and followed one another to the
Island. First they rented or boarded, but soon were buying homes, establishing solid foundations for the black community in the Highlands of Oak Bluffs.” (Cromwell p. 14)

Shearer Cottage soon began to attract African Americans from other parts of the country, particularly New York City. Among the New Yorkers who came was Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., who like his son: Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. (Hayden p.55) Adam Sr. first brought his son to Shearer Cottage in 1921. (Dresser p.71) Adam Jr. honeymooned at Shearer Cottage with his first wife Isabel Washington Powell and purchased a house with her in the Highlands in 1937. (Hayden p.26) According to Hayden,

“Adam Jr. once wrote in his ‘New York Amsterdam News’ column, Come One, Come All – My Black Brothers and Sisters to Martha’s Vineyard ... I will meet you in my bare feet.’ “And they’ve been coming ever since then’ remarked Mrs. Powell. ‘Oh did he ever attract people here.’” (Hayden p.30)

Cromwell further attests to the impact the arrival of New Yorkers had on the growth of the community and Adam Jr.’s influence,

At this time, [pre-World War II] summer people seemed to come more and more from the New York area and reflected the broad spectrum of New York life: they were lawyers, doctors, teachers, businessmen and gamblers. The reasons for the change are many. A greater familiarity with the Island by New Yorkers, brought on, in part, by the growing popularity of Shearer Cottage whose owner lived in New York City in the winter and, of course, the popularity and visibility of the dynamic Adam Powell, Jr., were among the reasons (Cromwell, p18).

The contrast between Boston and New York, original resident and second wave arrival, resonated on both sides, revealing a philosophical difference in racial presentation. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson in her
book Dorothy West's Paradise: A Biography of Class and Color lays out the conflict first quoting Isabel, “Powell freely admits to her interloper status: ‘We were New Yorkers, who had to set the style, to be that example for the next one who would follow in our footsteps.’” (Sherrard-Johnson p.154) The arrival of the New Yorkers before the war upset the existing “cosmopolitan canopy” that had featured an African American middle class from Boston that was used to commercial activity with whites, and whose livelihood was derived from those interactions; with a new middle class used to the commercial, professional, and religious segregation of Black New York, whose livelihood was derived from serving Blacks alone. This new class brought with them a lack of sensitivity to or interest in the perceptions of white people. West tells a story about access to the local beach in the Highlands as an example of this convention-breaking behavior. In the version of the story in Vineyard Voices, West describes the New Yorkers as follows:

But the original summer families were Bostonians. And when the colony grew, it grew to about twelve families. When we went to the beach, we went to Highland Beach. Now we sat on the beach, and we behaved well. Then the New Yorkers came....

And the women were – they were good-looking women in good-looking clothes. But they had paint on their faces. And they smoked cigarettes. But even worse than that, you see, they were boarding, and they wanted to stay on the beach all day. So they had food in baskets. Mostly chicken. Chicken, I think, travels well in baskets. But you see, we have a reputation for eating chicken and watermelon.

So there they were, and we said, “They’re going to lose the beach for us! They’re going to lose the beach for us!” And I swear to God, one summer we came down, and it said “Private.” (Lee, p36)

Sherrard-Johnson expands,
Powell’s language so accurately echoes both West’s and Cromwell’s characterizations of ‘New Yorkers’ as distinct from other island vacationers (see the stories about the lost beach) that the similarity suggests that Powell was well aware of how the so-called founding families might have viewed her when she first arrived. (p154)

Elijah Anderson and Jill Nelson both refer to the kind of moment Dorothy West and her Boston compatriots experienced. For Anderson, “…black people continue to be strongly associated with the ‘iconic ghetto’, regardless of their actual connection to the ghetto.” (Anderson, p256) The closing of the Highland Beach, is an example of the fragility of Anderson’s cosmopolitan canopy. Nelson describes this fragility saying, “Here, what racism exists is largely sub rosa, manifesting itself when black Americans overwhelm unspoken and perhaps unnoticed limitations. Such eruptions are usually focused around a specific event: the arrival of too many unfamiliar black faces on a holiday weekend or an attempt to buy property in a neighborhood where blacks have not traditionally lived.” (Nelson, p 121)

Despite, or because of, the differences in representation, the black community of Oak Bluffs experienced a wave of growth after World War II. The growth occurred in the form alluded to by Dorothy West. New arrivals came first as boarders at an inn like Shearer Cottage or as house guests. The second stage was to rent a cottage, while inviting house guests of one’s own, and the third stage was to become a homeowner. Thomas Dresser outlines this process in his book African Americans of Martha’s Vineyard: From Enslavement to Presidential Visit, as well, “A third wave of African Americans, more wealthy than their predecessors, vacationed on the Vineyard beginning in the mid-1940s and were part of a leisure middle and upper class. They stayed as guests at black-owned lodging houses, primarily Shearer Cottage and later bought their own homes.” (Dresser, p75) Many of the older summer residents interviewed by Jill Nelson fall into this category. Adelaide Cromwell sites 1944 as the year blacks first began to purchase property in the “Gold Coast”, “…through the familiar technique of a ‘straw’, using a
white intermediary who was willing to sell to a Black.” (Cromwell, p18) Barbara Brown DePasse elaborates on the straw technique when describing how her father, Dr. Lucien Brown, purchased the family home on Waban Park in 1944: “This house was not even publicly on the market. A man named Evan D. Bodfish helped my father purchase the house. The town was mad with him and he engineered the sale. They did not know the woman who looked at the house on our behalf was a very light-skinned black woman. It was owned by a man named Gardner who lost his money when the mills on the Cape went south.” (Nelson, p.127)

The combination of distressed sales and the straw led to the growth of the “Gold Coast” neighborhood and the arrival of a whole new generation of summer residents. Edward Brooke, a former Washingtonian, now starting his law practice in Boston, also purchased his first home in the neighborhood. Brooke was introduced to Oak Bluffs through the standard pattern, starting with a visit to friends who already owned. Brooke describes the purchasing process in his memoir Bridging the Divide:

Soon I was house hunting, and I found one on Canonicus Avenue in Oak Bluffs. It had three bedrooms, two baths, and a large living room. What’s more, it was completely furnished – the seller was a widow who could no longer make the trip from Indiana each summer. The price, $4,500 was astonishingly low. I withdrew that amount from my savings account where my wartime pay had been gathering interest for several years and bought this lovely bungalow.

(Brooke, p49)

The Finley’s purchased 14 Pequot in 1955 for $4,700 (Nelson, p, 201), the same year as Jill Nelson’s family bought one of the most prominent houses in all Oak Bluffs, on the corner of Ocean Park and Sea View Avenue, overlooking the Sound. Nelson writes how her mother recalled the purchase: “She loved to tell the story of the response of some people when she and my father purchased their house for the
low five figures. ‘Oh, these people thought we were crazy,’ she’d laugh. ‘No black had ever paid that much money for a house here, for all I know no one in Oak Bluffs ever had. They told us we were nuts, would make it difficult for other blacks, drive the prices up.’ “ (Nelson p., 273)

Dorothy West lyrically describes the real estate opportunities available to blacks in the “Gold Coast” in several passages in *The Richer, The Poorer*.

The great houses stood empty, too large to run without servants, and too few if any families who could still afford staff. The hotels and shops struggled to stay open were barely staying alive. ‘For Sale’ signs were everywhere and there were no buyers. (West, p. 240)

With Pearl Harbor, prosperity zoomed from the high-rise to hovel, money became a common commodity, and those who had never had a cent to spare could look beyond the landlord’s outstretched hand. New economic classes emerged and rapidly became aware that there were people in established classes who lived lives of more variety than city streets and subway benches. The new partakers of prosperity did not know what a day in the country looked like but now had the means to find out.

There were blacks who tried the island once, and came no more.... But others found more than they had ever hoped that they would find. A place where they could stand to full size. The town was right for them, and the time of their coming was right for the town.

They made a massive imprint. They bought the big neglected houses, and other long-empty cottages, lifted their sagging facades, put in new plumbing and wiring, scrubbed and painted. The more improvements they made, the more they paid in taxes and increased the town’s returns. (West, 241)
The black community of Oak Bluffs expanded and thrived through the 1950s and 1960s driven as much by depressed real estate values as by the expansion of the black middle class. Nelson maintains, “During the 1950s and ‘60s there were more than a few houses that stayed empty and boarded up summer after summer, not only in Oak Bluffs but in other island towns as well. Until the early 1970s it was not uncommon to purchase a large cottage for four or five figures.” (2005, p.33) The confluence of relatively inexpensive summer homes in a pedestrian-friendly beach town with uncommon density, and a lifestyle based on a single summer wage earner, made for a unique environment for black middle-class families to bond and thrive as a single community. This was Oak Bluffs in the 1950s and early ‘60’s. It would not remain the same.
Chapter 4: Oak Bluffs in the Late Twentieth Century

The Sixties

Benchmarks  
Summer Population of Martha’s Vineyard: 40,000

Percent of African American Population in U.S. Over 25 Having Completed College: 4.7%

Minimum Household Income for Top 20% of U.S. Households: $11,840

Percent of African American Households with Household Income of $100K+: 2.8%

(from the Vineyard Gazette and the U.S. Census)

The sixties in Oak Bluffs reflected many of the changes going on in American mainstream society. The boomer generation, of which my brother and I were a part, became teenagers in the sixties. Youth culture, the growth of the suburbs, and the rise of the Civil Rights Movement all made their presence felt in Oak Bluffs. The small A&P grocery on Circuit Avenue closed, moving to a larger location outside of Edgartown, with a large parking lot, something Circuit Avenue with its diagonal street parking and pedestrian orientation was never meant to provide. In its place, for a summer, was a coffee house that attracted counter-culture white kids from up-island. Carly Simon and the Taylor boys first sang there. Then the Reliable Market moved up the street, displacing the coffee house and again provided the locals with a full-service grocery to visit after the daily trip to the Post Office. As government spending strengthened research universities and baby boomers stared attending college, faculty salaries began to rise, and my family had a little more money. The Civil Rights Movement brought a new urgency and meaning to black people’s lives. Within my family the move from Princeton to State College Pennsylvania dominated the decade. With the move west, before the construction of Interstate 80, Oak Bluffs was now a two-days drive away. My grandmother, fearful of having her only child so far away, moved in with us in Pennsylvania, and my father now worked on the quarter, rather than the semester system, making summers off a less frequent occurrence.
Within the black Oak Bluffs community in the sixties, few of our neighbors had heard of Penn State University, much less its namesake town of State College. These places did not register in the Oak Bluffs’ consciousness. My brother and I were repeatedly asked if our dad taught at Penn and whether we lived in Philadelphia, which, at the time were at the outer edge of the known world of Oak Bluffs. With my grandmother now living with us, the Oak Bluffs house became less her space and more my parents’, at least when we were there.

Happy Valley

Our move to State College seemed to come out of the blue. My brother and I remember only one discussion about it, and I have no memory of any exploratory trips, as I did with later offers. I suspect that the secretiveness of the move revolved around my father not being granted tenure. My first awareness of the move was when the whole family went to the Princeton airport to meet a man who was flying in from State College just to meet us. His name was J. Alvin Hawbaker. He was a real estate developer who was building Park Forest Village in Patton Township, just north of town. My brother and I were eager to meet him, as there was the promise of a flight in his private plane. The flight never happened because of bad weather. It turns out that Hawbaker flew all this way because he, as the developer, had a house in Park Forest Village that he could sell to whomever he chose, and before he integrated his development, he needed to meet our whole family. We had to become known.

So, in September of 1961, using my father’s mortgage from the World War II GI Bill, my parents became homeowners for the first time, and our family moved to a community where its inhabitants’ only knowledge of or experience with black people came from watching TV and following Penn State football. Our family was not only the sole black family in Park Forest Village, my brother and I seemed to be two-thirds of the black students in the entire State College Area school system. The white people here were quite different from those we knew in Princeton. State College was not an Ivy League college town or
an exclusive exurb of New York City, with faculty members unable, for the most part, to afford housing of their own. Here, the more affluent university families lived in the borough proper, while the less affluent lived in the surrounding townships, many in new developments with names like Harris Acres, Overlook Heights, and our own Park Forest Village. State College wasn’t an exurb of anywhere. It was, as the name indicates, a college town created to be the home of the state university. It was located in the middle of the state to serve that purpose, nestled in Appalachia, calling itself ‘Happy Valley’, a name my brother and I later claimed came from the fact that people like us didn’t live there. It took a while for it to dawn on me that we were the one and only black family in town. I vividly remember trick-or-treating in our neighborhood that first October and having a woman say, “You must be in that new colored family that just moved in,” and me responding, with my typical cluelessness to racial questions from white people, “No. We aren’t new. We’ve been here since September.”

Appalachia – with its poverty, isolation, and overwhelming whiteness – existed right across the highway from Park Forest Village in a community called Woodycrest. The population in the State College area was booming and when we arrived, there were not enough schools to house all its students. Patton Township had no schools at all, so we were bussed by grade to other locations. Fifth graders, like my brother, went to the Houserville School in one of the other townships, while third graders like me went to two single classrooms in church buildings in the center of the borough. The third-grade bus went through Woodycrest. Unfamiliar with rural white poverty or outhouses, when I came home from school the first day I had two questions for my parents: Why were all the poor kids white? And what were those little houses in the back yards of the homes in Woodycrest?

My brother and I could bike within Park Forest Village, but going anywhere else required a parent (usually our mom) driving us. We played youth sports: little league baseball across the highway and in the other townships with the kids from Park Forest Village and Woodycrest, basketball in church gyms
on a team from our neighborhood, and soccer with kids from the whole State College area, and we were
driven to all these events. We took music lessons, piano at first, as we had in Princeton and then we
learned band instruments. My brother showed an early gift for the piano and the faculty wife who gave
us lessons soon told my parents that he needed to take lessons with members of the music faculty at
the university, rather than studying with her. Over our next few years, my brother’s life was increasingly
taken over by the piano and we both withdrew from team sports. We spent more and more of our time
playing tennis with each other for free on the university courts. Playing tennis, both with our dad – who
grew up playing tennis on the campus of Hampton Institute with his brother – and with each other,
became our primary recreational activity. It was also the one thing that connected us to Oak Bluffs: a
world that seemed more and more distant.

Tennis

In the sixties, for my brother and me, tennis became the center of our life in Oak Bluffs. We would
spend our allowance on new balls at the Corner Store and on paying for court time by the hour on the
public courts in Niantic Park, across the street from Neil and Evan. We would bike the three blocks to
the courts and sign up for as much court time as was available and that we could afford. Just as in State
College, we only played with each other. Tennis was a big part of the black community in Oak Bluffs.
Mildred Henderson, in Jill Nelson’s *Finding Martha’s Vineyard* recalls,

I loved the tennis tournament in Oak Bluffs, because you’d go to the tournament and you’d see
‘Talented Tenth’ Americans. There was Senator Edward Brooke, there was Judge Herbie Tucker
of Boston, there was Judge Joe Mitchell, Dr. George Branch. It was a gathering, and with very
few exceptions it was black. (Nelson pp. 193-194)

In the sixties, Edward Brooke and his mother Helen were, in the view of my grandmother and her
generation, the titular heads of the black Oak Bluffs community. Adelaide Cromwell asserts, that the
arrival of Brooke stands with the founding of the Cottagers, as the two defining events of Oak Bluffs from the fifties on. (Cromwell p.20) Brooke, in 1958, purchased the Morningstar Estate at 34-36 Nashawena Park. (Hayden p.153) The property had its own tennis court, but starting in 1959 he became an organizer of the annual Oak Bluffs Labor Day Tournament along with Lincoln Pope Sr., and for many years, according to Hayden, he handed out the trophies. (Hayden p.155) Brooke’s participation became more and more significant as he rose through the Republican political ranks in Massachusetts, first as the state’s attorney general, and then as the first black U.S. Senate candidate of a major party since Reconstruction. His 1966 senatorial campaign was a watershed moment for the black community of Oak Bluffs. My grandmother and her set talked constantly that summer of the need to support “Helen’s boy Eddie” and cars driven by black people with New York, New Jersey, and DC plates all seemed to have “Proudly for Brooke” bumper stickers. Brooke’s Italian wife, who he had met during his service as an infantry officer in World War II, was rarely seen and barely mentioned, except by the occasional black female who would lament that her “peasant” background was “holding Eddie back.”

The world my brother and I now occupied in State College and the black world of Oak Bluffs collided in the Labor Day Tournament. One year, when we were in Oak Bluffs over the Labor Day weekend, my brother and I decided to enter the annual tennis tournament. We went to the house where the seedings were posted having entered separately in boys’ singles and together in men’s doubles. Boys who we knew growing up were there including Lincoln Pope, III, or Linky as he was called, Scottie Branca and numerous adults we did not know. When Scottie’s seeding was announced for boys’ singles it was with a different last name. When we got home I asked my grandmother why she had always called him by the wrong name. She responded that he was always Scottie Branca to her because that was his grandmother’s last name. He was a Branca just as we were Curtises. Black Oak Bluffs was still defined by the women who stayed there all summer and the people who stayed in their houses were identified through them, whether you were a teenage boy and the senator from Massachusetts. That year’s
tournament held for us an even greater surprise. When we arrived for our first-round men’s doubles match we discovered that one of our adult opponents had been replaced by Senator Brooke, and a large crowd had gathered to see their senator perform. Our first-round match had become one of the major social events of the summer.

My brother and I, however, only knew of tennis as a sport – a sport played with a fierceness that competitive teenage brothers who only played each other could understand. We had no concept of “social” tennis. My brother, now in his mid-sixties, still doesn’t. Keeping the ball in play to prolong a point and thus providing all the players an opportunity to participate was not how we played. We always played hard and played to win, and it was often ugly tennis. For my brother, it was an ace or a fault, a winner or a miss-hit with nothing in between, and that is how we played against Edward Brooke and his partner. All black Oak Bluffs, it seemed, had come to see their senator play tennis and we weren’t providing them with the opportunity. Instead they had to endure two teenagers who didn’t know how to “play well with others.” There were murmurs from the crowd, a volley hitting the senator, followed by heated exchanges under our breaths, for we at least knew enough not to argue out loud, and it was over very quickly. We lost in straight sets. This was a world of civility and social decorum where we were not only unskilled, we had no point of reference to understand it. As my brother and I grew older and our world expanded to include places where being black and middle class was not something done in isolation, but rather a way of being within a community, our understanding and appreciation for the black community of Oak Bluffs grew. Particularly when we had our own children, we did not want them to suffer the sense of displacement we had felt living in State College.

Growing Into Blackness

Outside the family, the sixties brought its own set of changes to Oak Bluffs. The Cottagers developed a broader social agenda. Their summer schedule of social events now were fundraisers for the Martha’s
Vineyard chapter of the NAACP and for college scholarships for local high school students. By 1968 the organization had its own home on Pequot Avenue: Cottager’s Corner, and Dorothy West had come out of her literary seclusion to write her own column with the same name in “The Vineyard Gazette.” The children of the baby boom who spent summers here in the fifties were now teenagers of the sixties. The older ones were off to college and our perception of ourselves as black people and others’ perceptions of us was changing radically. The white northern perception that blacks possessed a certain nobility in the non-violent struggle for civil rights had turned to one of fear stoked by more militant images on TV, urban riots, and Nixon’s war on crime. The feeling within the black Oak Bluffs community was that the town authorities might to succumb to those fears and my grandmother and others of her set rose to oppose that perception of their grandchildren. When the Oak Bluffs police wanted to add a part-time summer officer to “deal with the crowds of youth” gathering at night on Circuit Avenue they lobbied to have one of our own hired. I remember the day my grandmother and her friends all went to the foot of Circuit Avenue to watch Linky Pope direct traffic. That lasted only one summer, as Linky had better things to do on his summer vacation. The next summer, a crowd of black teenage boys walking home from the movies, with my brother and I among them, were stopped by the new summer cop, some white guy whose only experience of black people seemed to come from TV. He told us to stop and had us stand under the glare of his flashlight and asked what we were doing. “Walking home from the movies. Don’t you know who we are?” He did not. He had violated our sense of safety and had challenged our identities. How were we to respond? Our impulse was to give him what he expected. If he wanted angry young black men from TV, we would give him what he wanted. Garbage in, garbage out. To him we were black males from Elijah Anderson’s “iconic ghetto” and my brother and I were now part of that perception. Anderson describes this in his essay “The White Space” (2015),

In the absence of routine social contact between blacks and whites, stereotypes can rule perceptions, creating a situation that estranges blacks. In these circumstances, almost any
unknown black person can experience social distance, especially a young black male – not because of his merit as a person but because of the color of his skin and what black skin has come to mean as others in the white space associate it with the iconic ghetto. (p. 13)

The growth of the affluent black community in Oak Bluffs and the growth of the black middle class across America was now redefining social relations and giving new purpose to the Oak Bluffs community. As Anderson states in the *Cosmopolitan Canopy*, “The most problematic aspect of social relations under the cosmopolitan canopy appears when the color line is suddenly drawn, and an issue that people had assumed mattered little comes to dominate the whole situation.” (p.154)

With more and more African Americans living in what had been traditionally white communities, going to predominantly white schools, and participating in mostly white social activities, the possibility of growing up as my brother and I had, isolated from any type of black community, increased for other blacks after the sixties. Anderson asks, “How do cosmopolitan blacks and other minorities navigate such confusing environments, which are tolerant enough to admit them, and even at times welcome them, but which also remind black people of the extent of their own marginality?” (p151) Although my own parents did not, many middle class and affluent blacks answered Anderson’s question by consciously seeking out opportunities for themselves and their children to connect with other black families in the same situation. While many of these opportunities were structured, through clubs and social organizations such as such as Jack and Jill, Oak Bluffs would provide an organic, unstructured setting in which to learn these skills.

That navigation comes to dominate the life of the black community in Oak Bluffs from the seventies through the current day. According to Anderson,

The post-civil-rights era has been formed by a highly successful racial incorporation process that vastly increased the size of the black middle class and allowed many of its members to approach
parity with their white counterparts. Yet many middle-class black people still find themselves occasionally treated as if they were indistinguishable from the most stigmatized figures that represent their race in the imagination of fearful whites .... The stigma of blackness, compounded by the contagion of ghetto stereotypes, continues to afflict African American professionals and executives, even in their own homes in predominantly white neighborhoods.

(Anderson p156)
The Seventies

Benchmarks  
Summer Population of Martha's Vineyard: 40,000
Percent of African American Population in U.S. Over 25 Having Completed College: 6.4%
Minimum Household Income for Top 20% of U.S. Households: $20,360
Percent of African American Households with Household Income of $100K+: 5.1%
(from the Vineyard Gazette and the U.S. Census)

The decade of the 1970s in my family, in Oak Bluffs, and in the nation revolved around a change in the perception of social space and the idea of community, a rise in household incomes through the growth of two-income households, an expansion of educational and occupational opportunity for blacks spurring the growth of the black middle class, and the rise in the popularity of and the accessibility to the Vineyard as a whole. The change in the perception of social space and the idea of community played out for my family in our relationship to the house and to the neighborhood in which it was placed.

Social Space & the Idea of Community

The house on the corner of Waban and Pennacook has a certain position among the houses of Oak Bluffs. In some ways, it is exceptional, but in most ways, it represents the evolution of “Gold Coast” real estate from the beginning of the African American presence in the late 1940s until today. As a corner property, on two lots, the house is larger than most in the Gold Coast neighborhood. It was not one of the smaller ground-level gingerbreads with their t-shaped design where half the living space seems to be the u-shaped front porch around the front of the house, nor is it one of the grand three-story houses on Sea View Avenue over-looking the Sound. Like the houses on Sea View, our house is a painted wood-shingled structure raised on brick pillars, with an open crawl space underneath. The pillars, on the Sea...
View homes raises the view of the water above the flow of traffic and creates a greater sense of privacy, as people walking by on the street can’t look directly into the first-floor rooms. This is particularly important on our corner house as the side of the house facing Waban Avenue is only a few feet from the street. Another feature separating the house from most of its neighbors is the finishing of the interior walls. Most Oak Bluffs houses, even those in the Gold Coast, have wood plank walls, maintaining the rustic feel of the early cottages. Our house has some precursor to sheet rock: large panels more the consistency of cardboard, with wainscoting covering each edge, instead of a smooth spackled surface.

The only room at ground level in the house is the bar in the former garage where you need go down a few steps to enter. The rest of the house does not have the linear layout found in most of the smaller gingerbreads. Instead it juts out from side to side. In the fifties, if you were to walk from the bar into the rest of the house, you would find a washroom with a sink and toilet to your left, and a pantry with the water heater to your right. Then you would enter the kitchen with a doorway beyond the pantry leading to the side door on Waban and the back stairs to the second floor. To the left of the kitchen was my grandfather’s study, with his desk underneath a large illustrated map of New Jersey. The study had a bed as well, and during the Patton family’s July visits it was their son Waverly’s room. Back then there was also a door leading from the kitchen down to the side yard where my grandmother tended her flowerbeds. A large hedge separated the yard from the house next door on Pennacook and a low fence with holly bushes separated the yard from the Finleys next door on Waban. Next to the old side stairs were three fuel tanks: two for propane and one for oil. Both fed the big stove in the kitchen, with the propane for cooking and the oil for heat. The oil component of the stove, along with the fireplace in the living room were the only sources of heat for the house. In addition to the stove, the kitchen had a porcelain double sink under the window facing the side yard, a chrome and metal table with matching chairs, a corner built-in hutch, and a high window with small colored glass panes above the counter leading to the dining room. The one phone for the house was on the counter. Back then the phone had
no dial. You picked up the phone and told the operator what number you wanted to reach. The phone was also on a shared, or party line. We knew to only pick up after two short rings. One long ring meant the call was for someone else.

Today, the rest of the first floor is pretty much as it was in the fifties. A new rattan sofa and love seat have been added and the wooden light fixture over the dining room table has been replaced. Both, after much effort, are reasonable facsimiles of the originals. The rest of the furniture is the same as when my grandparents bought the house fully-furnished. Leaving the kitchen, to the right is the dining room, which extends to within a few feet of Waban Avenue. To the left is a coat closet which extends under the I-shaped staircase leading to the second floor. The first few steps have a bannister overlooking the living room at the front of the house, then the staircase turns left to reach the second floor. The whole right-hand wall of the living room facing Waban Avenue is a series of double-hung windows, leading to what might have been a part of the front porch on Pennacook. That too, is all windows across the Pennacook side of the house. French doors lead to the front porch with its mandatory rocking chairs. The main steps on the porch go down to the side yard and the brick path to the street. The path continues along the side of the house all the way back to where the old kitchen stairs were. The living room fireplace, made of the same brick as the path, backs onto the porch where there is another door leading to what was my grandmother’s bedroom. This bedroom is off the living room, behind the main staircase. After my grandmother and father died, it became my mother’s room. After my mother died, neither my brother nor I have wanted to sleep there. With its own door to the porch, we prefer to use that bedroom as the primary guest room with its own full bathroom and no memories.

The second floor has four more bedrooms each was designated for a Davis or a Patton with the parents with their own distinct bedrooms and the kids overlapping. The room my brother and I shared became the room for Lori and Margul, while Pam had the room at the top of the back stairs all to herself. As a
teenager, I moved across the hall to Neil and Rose’s July room. I thought, why share when open rooms were available? The floorplan, with its many off-shoots, had a practical purpose that still applies today. Each room has windows on multiple walls for cross ventilation. The bedrooms stacked on the second floor above my grandmother’s room, the living room, the dining room, and the kitchen all have cathedral ceilings to go with the windows, creating a naturally drafty house, minimizing the summer heat. All the house’s features, with the exception of the interior walls, make the house a costly and impractical candidate for winterization. At best, insulation could be added between the exterior walls and the interior paneling. How the house was modified over the years reflects not only changes in technology, but reflects changing attitudes within my family and in society. Issues of privacy versus community, isolation versus connectivity, and work versus leisure, all play out in the renovations in our house.

Our housing in Princeton closely mirrored Oak Bluffs in terms of privacy and community. We always lived in faculty housing in Princeton. Just as we did in Oak Bluffs, we walked to town and walked through campus to school. I remember walking through campus to kindergarten accompanied only by my second-grade brother. These walks, unaccompanied by adults, were repeated every summer, except instead of walking to school we would walk to the Flying Horses or to the beach. In Princeton, we lived in a row house across from the McCarter Theater. Where we played was the communal front lawn of the complex, with the other faculty kids from the row. There was no front yard and we never went to a playground. Once out your front door all space was communal space, from the open space in front of the College Road row houses all the way across campus to the Nassau Street School. For Princeton families in faculty housing, none of this space was considered off-limits, none of it was private space controlled by any one family. The more affluent faculty who moved out of faculty housing were part of a growing suburban world, most buying new construction in Princeton Township. As a family of junior faculty and as an African American family in Princeton in the fifties, moving to the suburban world with
its heightened sense of privacy and personal space was not yet an option, and as far as I know, something my family never considered. The suburbs were the new American lifestyle, a lifestyle at odds with the density and community both of Oak Bluffs and of the Princeton campus. We would only become a part of this less social, more isolated, and income-dependent suburban America when our family moved to State College, living our first years there in the development of Park Forest Village.

Karyn Lacy adds unique insight into the physical characteristics of both Oak Bluffs and the modern suburb. In describing the variation found in the three modern D.C. suburbs in her study, Lacy notes,

> A distinguishing characteristic is that the developer’s original vision plays a significant role in shaping community life long after the homes have been constructed and the work crews and sales staff have moved on to new sites. It is the suburban developer who initially establishes the personality and character of a community, stipulating the house sizes and styles, the selling prices, the spacing between homes, the layout of the streets and the placement of the common areas. These features determine not only what kind of people will move into the subdivision but also the conditions under which they will interact with one another. (p.51)

Oak Bluffs was a planned community just as much as the modern suburb. Its late nineteenth century developers had a particular middle-class homeowner in mind. It was built for people who viewed walking and talking to one’s neighbors as entertainment and would feel a common bond. It was built for the urban dweller who relished the social interaction of close quarters. Oak Bluffs had been founded as Cottage City, and the city part of the name was no accident. The structural features of Oak Bluffs that Lacy mentions as defining characteristics for social interaction: the spacing between homes, the layout of the streets, the placement of common areas were not going to change, and these were not the structural features commonly found in the modern suburb.
My family rejected certain aspects of this new suburban life. We planted a whole new lawn, replacing the patchy grass we found upon moving in, but my parents paid a lawn company to do the work. My father refused to buy a lawn mower. Growing up on the campus of Hampton Institute, he had his fill of Booker T. Washington and the value of manual labor. Neither he nor his sons would mow the lawn. Other people’s kids, by implication white kids (since there were no other black kids around) could do that. There were other aspects of life in the suburbs that my family did embrace. We got a dog. We grilled and ate dinner on a picnic table on the back patio. We joined youth sports teams, we didn’t choose to know most of our neighbors, and we drove almost everywhere. The dog spent all her outside time chained in the back yard. She never walked around the neighborhood unless she escaped. Then it was a neighborhood event trying to catch her.

For our dog, the house in Oak Bluffs was a constant violation of her sense of territory. If people were talking in the street, she would follow them from room to room barking all the way from the dining room through the living room, until they either continued on Waban, or turned the corner onto Pennacook. She was still chained in the side yard down the steps from the kitchen, but she could see the street and barked at those passing by. My mother lobbied to build a six-foot-high fence across the side yard, making most of it out of sight from the street. I don’t know if this was for the dog’s sake or hers. After my grandmother died, and the house became my mother’s house, she had a deck built in the back of the side yard behind her fence, with a sliding glass door off remaking her father’s study and destroying cousin Waverly’s bedroom. She installed a modern kitchen with an electric stove, a dishwasher, a garbage disposal, and a washer and dryer in the pantry off the bar. The bar was still the bar, but no one came over to play cards anymore. The only card games were with the family around the dining room table. The door most used was the side door to where we parked the car on Waban. More and more time was spent driving: going to the new A&P outside of Edgartown, driving “up-island” to go sailing in Menemsha Pond, or to visit academic friends of my parents in Chilmark or Gay Head. My
mother complained about Mrs. Thorne (the matriarch of the African American family that had
purchased the Palladino’s house) parking her car on our side of Waban, either in “our spot” by the side
door or under our dining room window. Social life in the house moved from the front porch on the
street to the back deck behind the fence. The closeness of the neighbors was now a problem, not an
asset.

The neighbors were also changing. It would be the start of the summer when you would see who was
gone and who was new. In the seventies, before people in the neighborhood started to rent, at least
the new people you saw were the owners and you might see them again. One summer the Vogels were
gone and we were never sure who replaced them. The Ritters as well as the Palladinos were replaced
by the Thomases and the Thornes, black families who stayed all summer in the old tradition and we
came to know them in the traditional way. We talked from porch to porch, finding things we had in
common. Mr. Thomas would leave early most mornings to go play golf and listened to jazz on his high­
end audio system. Mrs. Thomas and her sister would walk to the beach and spend afternoons on the
porch. My brother and I would talk to Mr. Thomas about his listening choices, as we could clearly hear
what he played from our house. In many ways, the Thornes were the last of the old Oak Bluffs summer
people. They purchased the Palladino house in 1972 and they followed the old pattern with the wife,
Hurmie, coming up for the whole summer and the husband, Bob, coming for two weeks in August. They
came from New Rochelle where Bob was a dentist. When interviewed by Jill Nelson, Hurmie says,
“When we bought this house I said, Nobody’s giving me two weeks on Martha’s Vineyard, so I quit my
job as a medical technician. Bob, my husband, used to come for two weeks in August, and occasionally
for weekends. It was wonderful to have this house to myself.” (Nelson, p.197) While Hurmie doesn’t
share the purchase price for her house across the street, it was still affordable. She goes on to say, “The
mortgage was $104 a month. I’ll never forget it. You couldn’t stay in a motel for a week for that
amount of money in 1970, and that’s what we bought the house for.” (Nelson p.197) The Thornes soon
had grandchildren as did my mother, and they later found common ground after settling the parking issue. My parents’ discomfort with the closeness of the neighborhood, however, continued. My father wanted a quiet place to write, and they had grown accustomed to the quiet and privacy of suburbia. Before my grandmother’s death they started looking at new construction in the woods in Chilmark, searching for a kind of privacy Oak Bluffs and the house on Pennacook could was never intended to provide. With a price of $45,000 the Chilmark house was beyond my parents’ means. Even with their rising income, they had been priced out. They could remain in Oak Bluffs and on the Vineyard only as “inheritors,” never as “acquirers.”

The house also proved to be hard and expensive to maintain. Being a block from the water made for rough winters. The TV antenna always blew down, so we gave up and used rabbit ears on the black and white TV in the living room; the roof leaked; the window sashes kept breaking causing the windows to slam shut on their own accord; and the white paint on the shingles kept peeling. As her last act, my grandmother succumbed to a tin man and had the shingles covered with aluminum siding and storm widows installed, removing the remaining gothic details that had defined Oak Bluffs carpenter style from its inception. This was happening throughout the neighborhood. By the 1970s, there just weren’t enough families who could afford to maintain an un-winterized house or who could spend an entire summer there. The old Palladino house, now owned by the Thornes, got siding too as did one of the large houses on Sea View, and the old Powell house just fell into disrepair. Old was just old. These drafty Victorians didn’t fit with the suburban American lifestyle. They were built too close together, lacked modern conveniences and were too expensive to maintain. Although the idea of historic preservation was just coming into fashion, these houses were years away from being valued for their Victorian charm and their special history. Today houses like ours on Pennacook are part of the Copeland Plan District, named after the original planner of Oak Bluffs, where even a minor porch reconstruction project is now subject to public review.
If anything defined my parents, it was their desire to expose their children to and pull themselves into a wider world than the ones in which they grew up. For part of the summer of 1965 we lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts while my father taught at Harvard Summer School. We did the same thing at Yale in the summer of 1967, integrating the town of Madison, Connecticut, whose Long Island Sound beach, with its twice-a-day mud flats at low tide, was far less appealing than the end of the block in Oak Bluffs. In between, we spent the 1966-67 academic year in Turin, Italy where my father taught on a Fulbright fellowship. Once we returned to State College my parents determined that the educational opportunities for their sons were too limited there, and that we should go to boarding school. So in the fall of 1967 and in the fall of 1968 respectively, my brother and I each left for the Philips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. With the financial strain of private school tuitions and her new-found freedom as an empty-nester, my mother returned to work as an educational psychologist, working for the newly-formed Upward Bound Program at Penn State in the fall of 1968.

My father was now a full professor and started entertaining chairmanship offers from other universities. I remember him visiting Temple and Northern Illinois Universities and accompanying him on a visit to the University of Massachusetts after dropping my brother off at Exeter. We talked about how much closer we would be to Oak Bluffs, but nothing came of these possibilities. The arc of my father’s career as a professor of English changed completely in the Spring of 1968 with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. With that event, my father seemed to directly connect his identity as an African American to his career as an academic. He wanted to teach African American literature and resume the research he had begun as a senior scholar at Dartmouth. He was no longer a curiosity or a pre-racial person teaching Walt Whitman or Edwin Arlington Robinson, he was a rare commodity: a tenured professor with a trunk full of work on black literature waiting to be taught and written about. His
career, unlike his uncle Arthur’s would be in the mainstream of academia. Rather than suffer the segregated wages and marginalization of a Howard or Hampton, he could be compensated at fair market value. So, in the Fall of 1971, we left Penn State for the University of Iowa in Iowa City where my father became Professor of English and Chairman of the African American Studies Program and my mother became Vice President for Research at American College Testing. We became a two-income household moving from middle-class status into affluence with two cars, children at Yale and Exeter, and less leisure time than at any point in my family’s history. We were also now two full driving days away from Oak Bluffs.

Cultural Capital, Black Youth Culture and Racial Authenticity

Just as the cultural changes in society in the late 1960s brought a new recognition of blackness in academia, black youth culture made its presence felt in Oak Bluffs. The prominence of tennis at the public courts in Niantic Park faded, replaced by the basketball scene on the adjoining court. Bijan C. Bayne chronicles the growth of basketball in Niantic Park in his book Martha’s Vineyard Basketball: How a Resort League Defied Notions of Class and Race. A summer basketball league in Niantic Park was founded in 1970 (Bayne, p.1) with its original players, like the black pioneers in the Highlands, being Bostonians. The league’s participants were representatives of the new expanding black middle class. According to Bayne, “By 1974 and 1975 most of the black summer vacationers who played at The Courts no longer lived in Roxbury. After the civil rights movement, their dads, working at local companies such as Eastman Kodak and Raytheon, moved their families to suburbs such as Malden, Milton, Newton, and Randolph.” (Bayne, p.110)

Basketball even penetrated our house on Pennacook, with the youngest of my cousins, Marjul Patton, going to the park every evening to watch the games under the lights. Bayne quotes three Oak Bluffs summer residents who took in the scene at Niantic Park as teenagers. Damon Sanders-Pratt
remembers, “How many friends did I make at The Courts? Other than friends I made on Narragansett, basically all of my friends over the summer were met either on The Courts, watching games at The Courts, or through someone I met at The Courts.” (Bayne, p114) Robin Goodwin Bailey adds to the centrality of the Niantic Park courts to Oak Bluffs black youth culture in the 1970’s when she adds, “All the gals and fans parked around The Court in summer, and if your ‘guy’ or team made a play, the horns beeped.” (Bayne, p. 115) For Eric Anderson, whose family began spending summers in Oak Bluffs in 1976, Bayne reports, “As soon as his family arrived each summer, he would walk down to The Courts to see what was going on that year.” (Bayne, p.115) Even if playing in the league required being in Oak Bluffs for the entire summer, watching the games was open to all and provided a short-term teen visitor a means and a place to meet and socialize with other black youth in the community. Basketball in Niantic Park provided a unifying cultural point of connection, and just as Dorothy West’s New York beach goers had done thirty years before, altered the racial landscape of the community. These middle-class teenagers had embraced a black self-image, grounded not in the mores and decorum of previous generations, but in the energy and attitudes of black urban America, representing, in their own way, the “iconic ghetto” their parents spent so much effort trying to leave behind.

Tennis retreated from the public courts of Niantic Park to private clubs. Basketball was now the cultural currency that middle-class black youth brought with them each summer. They brought a new kind of cultural capital to Oak Bluffs. They were the “cultural straddlers” Karyn R. Lacy describes in her book Blue-Chip Black, who possess two kinds of capital: black and mainstream. Citing the work of Prudence Carter with low-income students, Lacy posits a similar pattern of behavior in the middle class. For the black youth of Oak Bluffs in the ‘70s, black cultural capital “... is of great importance to these young blacks because it allows them to signal their racial or ethnic identity authenticity to other black youth.” (Lacy, p.77) Combining this racial authenticity with middle-class status became one of the primary
activities of black youth in Oak Bluffs. They were, according to Lacy, “... learning how to move back and forth between minority and mainstream culture.” (Lacy, p.77) As Bayne concludes,

For Oak Bluffs summer leaguers of the late 1970s and 1980s and their friends, The Courts were as much the social center as they had been for us kids who were around when the leagues first started. It was where they congregated, honed their games, developed teenage crushes, and planned their late evenings. It was the place their parents knew they were after dinner. (Bayne, p127)

For my brother and me, tennis at Niantic Park had never provided us with that place. For us, there was no national cultural model of black youth behavior to be learned and the act of cultural straddling was not a skill we could master going back and forth between Oak Bluffs and the all-white mainstream we found in places like Princeton, or State College or Iowa City. Cultural straddling was a skill we began to acquire in boarding school and then in college. At Exeter, for the first time outside of Oak Bluffs, we were part of a community of other African Americans, granted it was small and exclusively male, but it had its own internal diversity with students whose parents were federal judges, to students brought to the academy through programs such as A Better Chance. My brother and I were members of the black student organization and developed friendships through classes and dorm life.

For my brother, straddling came to him as did so many other things, through music and the piano. His doubts about his place and purpose in western classical music began to grow during his senior year at Exeter and by the start of his freshman year at Yale, he had committed himself to becoming a jazz musician. Even in our physical isolation in the towns where we grew up, jazz was always played in our home. My brother and I exchanged albums as gifts and explored both forwards and backwards the music my parents listened to. He discovered the Impulse label albums of John Coltrane and spent long nights at Yale learning the modal style of McCoy Tyner. He took a year off and delved backwards into
the worlds of bebop and stride. Most importantly, he began to write his own music and collaborate with other musicians. By the end of the decade, my brother had moved to New York and had established a career as a jazz musician, recording multiple albums. Like my father, my brother was now personally and professionally connected through cultural expression to the broader black world, a world, for both of them, that would provide expanding opportunities and personal satisfaction. It also felt good to hear Mr. Thomas play one of his albums across the street. For my brother, he now had opportunities based on how he played and what he wrote, not on where he came from.

For my parents, they now had the opportunity to move back east, my father returning to the Ivy League in the Fall of 1972 to chair the Afro-American Studies program at Yale, and my mother to become director of research for undergraduate admissions. All three of them were together in New Haven. All three of them had now formed new personal identities, and in the world of Oak Bluffs, had the cultural capital needed to better navigate that community.

Cultural Capital and Social Ascendance

The acquisition of cultural capital was not something limited to youth in Oak Bluffs. The adults dealt in that currency as well. With the growth of mainstream opportunity for African Americans, Dorothy West, in her columns in the “Vineyard Gazette,” chronicled this ascent and tracked the changes impacting the Oak Bluffs community. Many of her observations from the original “Cottagers Corner,” which began in 1968 and the later, more expansive “Oak Bluffs” column beginning in 1973, can be found in the Dorothy West Martha’s Vineyard: Stories, Essays and Reminiscences by Dorothy West Writing in the Vineyard Gazette, edited by James Robert Saunders and Renae Nadine Shackelford. In this collection, West placed the tennis scene in these changing times, noting that, “The Oak Bluffs courts are full every day. Many of those playing are members of the Oak Bluffs Tennis Club and favorite people of this column because of their sportsmanship and good looks.” (Saunders & Shackelford, p. 21) She also laid out the
history of the community for the new arrivals, establishing the importance of the Cottagers (Saunders & Shackelford, p. 30) and of Shearer Cottage (Saunders & Shackelford, p. 45). In a column from August 1976 she described the visit of Andrew Young, Jimmy Carter’s ambassador to the United Nations, providing her readers with details on his education, occupation, purpose of his visit and an outline of his beliefs (Saunders & Shackelford, p. 45). Additional columns follow a similar pattern when describing a recent visitor. She would mention in who’s home the visitor was staying, outline the visitor’s occupation, educational background, and current accomplishments, as well as those of the spouse and children. (Saunders & Shackelford, p. 17) One early column from the summer of 1968 introduced the new owners of home on Samoset Avenue in the Gold Coast: Dr. Charles A. Pinderhughes and his wife Elaine. West provided her readers with all the pertinent information as well as where they lived off-island and a hint at their values. West wrote, “The Pinderhughes live in Roxbury by choice, and are active in community concerns and policy making.” (Saunders & Shackelford, p. 20) She went further in her social placement and origins of the family, “They are both Washingtonians by birth. Dr. Pinderhughes did his undergraduate work at Dartmouth, then returned to Washington to enter Howard Medical School. At Howard he met Elaine, and after their marriage did further work in their fields at Columbia University.” (Saunders & Shackelford, p. 20)

West placed the Pinderhughes family within the community, assigned them value, and made it possible for her readers to evaluate the newcomers relative to their own position in the community. I never met Dr. Pinderhughes, and my interactions with the extended Pinderhughes family came much later through my mother. This occurred despite the fact that Charles Pinderhughes had been my father’s roommate at Dartmouth.
Island Changes

The value and usage of the Oak Bluffs beach at the end of the block was radically altered when in the winter of 1973, the Army Corps of Engineers completed a massive beach build-up project. Instead of having the pay beach with its outdated shower facilities and aging pier and float, there was now a sand beach extending fifty yards out from the sea wall protected by a new stone jetty. Parking along Sea View Avenue remained free, so unlike so many beach towns on the New Jersey Shore, the Oak Bluffs beach had free access for residents and visitors alike. The local beach had become a destination attracting a new type of visitor. Whole families now came, staying all day. The beach was child-friendly with the calm waters of Nantucket Sound and the added benefit of a sand bar, just like the one at the State Beach of my childhood.

The new jetty created a physical boundary separating, to the right, the adult beach of the Inkwell without a sand bar, and the new beach to the left. While black families, particularly the ones with small children, often went to the new beach, it was now dominated by white families, who seemed to have re-discovered the appeal of Oak Bluffs. Now the town offered a wide public beach, with minimal surf, walking distance from the Flying Horses carousel, the fudge shops and ice cream parlors of Circuit Avenue, and the Strand and Island movie theaters whose first-run features changed daily. A stand-alone arcade with skee-ball, air hockey, and pinball machines had opened across the street from the Flying Horses. A new game, Pong, brought the video game out of the bars and into the world of children. It was unclear to me where these white families stayed. Some seemed to be residing in the houses of the Gold Coast farther away from the beach, but most came from the other island towns. Oak Bluffs, it seemed to me, had become a town white families visited, not one where they stayed.

Development in the other island towns started to explode in the ’70s. The growth did not include the purchase of old homes like the ones in Oak Bluffs. It was new construction in the woods and farmland
up-island like the house my parents had considered buying in Chilmark. Individual lots were being sold and developed, both as custom and speculative projects. Rumors spread that the beachfront property along the Atlantic at South Beach in Edgartown, and by the cliffs in Gay Head were to be considered private land, without public access. Fears of private homes dotting the shoreline caused some summer residents of means to form beach cooperatives to ensure access if privatization went through. Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy sponsored a bill in Congress to limit development with a special exemption for family compounds, but it failed to pass. Access to the island was made easier and paradoxically more expensive with the introduction of commercial jet service in 1970. This followed the introduction of a second ferry, the MV Uncatena in 1965. Up until that point, the MV Islander was the sole car ferry servicing the island. Since its entry into service in 1949 as the first vessel specifically designed to carry vehicles, access to the island by car was limited to 47 vehicles per trip. The masthead of every issue of the “Vineyard Gazette” includes the same paragraph on the left-hand side. It starts and ends by locating the island geographically: seven miles off the southeast coast of Massachusetts, twenty miles from the city of New Bedford, 80 miles from Boston, and 150 miles from New York (as the crow flies). In between, the Gazette lists the winter and summer population of the island. According to Hilary Wall, archivist and librarian for the Gazette, the summer population holds steady until the late 1970s, then between 1977 and 1987 the number jumps from 40,000 to 62,000. Each successive decade shows more and more growth. With houses such as ours becoming harder to maintain for the first generation of owners, the upper ends of the middle class expanding, and a new class of affluent African Americans rising through academia, government, and corporate America, who are the people and how do they change the black community of Oak Bluffs? That becomes the story of Oak Bluffs in the 1980s.
The Eighties

Benchmarks  Summer Population of Martha’s Vineyard: 62,000
            Percent of African American Population in U.S. Over 25 Having Completed College: 10.7%
            Minimum Household Income for Top 20% of U.S. Households: $43,578
            Percent of African American Households with Household Income of $100K+: 7.8%
(from the Vineyard Gazette and the U.S. Census)

My Mother’s House: Promoting the Next Generation

After my father’s death in the Spring of 1981 and my mother’s retirement that summer, the house on
Pennacook returned to its earlier pattern of use. Even when she moved from her house in Connecticut
to an apartment in New York strategically located between her grandchildren, my mother would drive
up in the beginning of June and stay through Labor Day, joined by her children and those grandchildren
for a week or so at a time. She would put on her hat (no gloves anymore) and walk to the Post Office
every day but Sunday, stopping to talk to friends and neighbors on their porches along the way. She
kept the same Post Office box (1313) her mother had. She invited old friends to visit like Jane Wright
and reconnected with the regional network of middle-class black women she had known growing up.
Adelaide Cromwell would come by the house and Jewel Plummer Cobb would take the passenger ferry
from Hyannis to come visit from her summer house on the Cape. My mother would also invite junior
faculty members from Yale and their families, introducing them as house guests to the Oak Bluffs
community. When Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates, one of the most well-known
members of the contemporary Oak Bluffs summer scene, was asked by Laura Roosevelt in the Martha’s
Vineyard Magazine how he was first introduced to the Vineyard, he recalls,

        I first came in the summer of 1981. I was invited by my mentor, Charles Davis, who was the first
        black man to be tenured in Yale’s English department. Charles and his wife Jeanne, had been
going to the Vineyard since the fifties, and Charles often talked about the Vineyard as a very special place. When he died in March, Jeanne invited me and my family to visit anyway, and we did. It was great and I’ve been going ever since. (Roosevelt, 8/1/08)

There are two interesting moves buried in this exchange between the writer and Professor Gates. First is the insistence of the writer to refer to Gates as a summer resident of the Vineyard as a whole, not of Oak Bluffs. In doing so, she places Gates in the mainstream of the island experience, not in the particularly racialized world of Oak Bluffs. Second, Gates ascribes his knowledge of Oak Bluffs as coming from his male mentor, not from the much more likely source of his mentor’s wife.

My mother felt it was important to introduce the younger generation of black academics to this world, and felt a particular desire to bring those with biracial children, like Gates and her own children, into the community’s casual embrace. Once her sons had children, introducing them to the routines of Oak Bluffs during their annual visits was the highlight of her summer. If her grandchildren were visiting over the Fourth of July, there were the fireworks in Edgartown. If her grandchildren were visiting the last two weeks of August there were the fireworks in Ocean Park sponsored by the Oak Bluffs Volunteer Fire Department; Illumination Night in the Campground with its candle-lit Chinese lanterns and band concert in the Tabernacle; and up-island, the West Tisbury Agricultural Fair with its carnival rides, ox pulls and skillet throwing contest. One of my favorite pictures from those years is my mother with my six-month old daughter sitting in her lap down the block at the Inkwell. While she was never a Polar Bear, my mother did go to the beach almost every afternoon, not to swim, but to socialize with a whole network of neighbors. Her beach crowd was mostly made up of other women her age, most of whom were also widows, who talked about the lives of their children and grandchildren, so having a live one in her lap, and the one and only girl, was a special treat. She would even invite my father’s sister to drive up from Baltimore for a joint birthday celebration each July.
My mother was not the only one looking to promote the progress of the new generation. Dorothy West continued to chronicle social events in her columns, but now her focus shifted from the accomplishments of the parents to those of the children. In one column from August of 1986 she wrote of the Vineyard wedding of Lani Guinier, whose father, like mine had been the director of an Ivy League African American Studies program. West’s column followed her usual pattern, placing Ms. Guinier and her family in the Oak Bluffs social hierarchy. West describes Ms. Guinier as “... daughter of Dr. Ewart Guinier, professor emeritus of Harvard and Ginni Guinier, residents of Cambridge and the Vineyard...” (Saunders & Shackelford, p.107) West then gave her readers Ms. Guinier’s professional position, remarking on her modernity in how she has chosen to identify herself, “Lani, who has kept her maiden name as have all her married friends, is an attorney in the New York offices of the NAACP’s Legal Defense and Education Fund,” (p.107) which was not out of line, except for her gender, with the job profile of the previous generation. Where one finds the real shift in this new generation is in West’s celebratory description of the wedding guests:

The guests arrived from around the country and across the seas. The governor of Arkansas was present. Bill Clinton and his wife Hillary, who were classmates of Lani at Yale Law School; and other Yale classmates, Bill Coleman and his wife Lovinda (Bill’s father William T. Coleman, Sr. was a former Secretary of Transportation); classmate Roger Wilkins, and his wife Patricia King, a journalist... (p.107)

Middle Class Values Under Siege

In her columns throughout the 1980s, West defended the Oak Bluffs community she knew from the threat of popular black culture. She referred to those she knew as middle class, even as they were becoming much more than that. In a column from February 1989 when her attention could turn away from the social comings and goings of the summer season, West stated her case: “It is the middle class,
with its implacable ambition to achieve a solid hold on a way of life that assures security and serenity, that serves as a bulwark between those who have everything and those who never had anything.” (Saunders & Shackelford, p. 121) West goes on in her column to respond to growing criticism from both inside and outside the black community of the elitist values of her class and island home: “I am continually bemused by those savants in print and television and radio who chastise the black middle class for preferring a style of living that offers security and serenity for themselves and their children instead of a total commitment to ghetto living. I cannot see what that achieves outside of a quasi uniformity of color.” (p.121) The specter of the “iconic ghetto” is raised again as the major threat to the comfort and success of the black middle class. All the work that West and her peers had done to secure their “security and serenity” was now under siege. Just as basketball had brought popular black culture to Oak Bluffs in the 1970s, mass media and media critics brought the ghetto to Oak Bluffs in the 1980s.

Those who became the physical embodiment of this siege were not in actuality ghetto dwellers, but were members of a new class of black people: young people whose behavior was not constricted by the old norms. Just as the arrival of the New Yorkers in the 1940s disrupted West’s Highlands world, these new arrivals upset the balance between black and white and between black and black. Bijan Bayne describes the new class as follows: “In the late 1980s and through the late 1990s, Oak Bluffs attracted thousands of young black professionals during the Fourth of July Weekend. Fortune 500 companies, the music industry, BET, and the leading black magazines were all represented. It was a single person’s dream.” (p.111) This new class of visitors ran up against not only the fears and prejudices of the day where they were viewed as a threat by being either too old or too young, they ran up against the physical limitations of Oak Bluffs whose very construction fostered a limited range of social behavior. Bayne notes these factors as well,
But Oak Bluffs had few night spots, and the somewhat larger dance club The Atlantic Connection (called the A.C.) to accommodate the weekend crowds. These establishments closed at 1:30 or 2am. Right behind the clubs were The Gingerbread Cottages in The Campground area... Inside the thin uninsulated walls of those nineteenth-century cottages on could probably hear the crowd noise from the overflow on Circuit Avenue once the clubs closed. Because the clubs closed so early and were so few in number, some vacationers hosted house parties featuring hundreds of guests, especially at the larger houses on Ocean Park a beach stone’s throw from The A.C. (p.111-112)

They were engaged in the same activity my brother and I had engaged in as teenagers: walking up and down Circuit Avenue looking for a party. Their age and numbers crossed a tipping point despite their requisite economic status. As Bayne explains,

This was not Virginia Beach, where primarily black young vacation crowds made national news in the early 1990s or Atlanta’s Freaknik, a people gazing, phone-number-collecting downtown spectacle that city banned during the same period. Unlike Virginia Beach and Freaknik, many of the July Fourth partiers were white-collar professionals. They weren’t undergrads; no drug dealers were among the revelers. Nevertheless, there were years of angry letters to the editors of the Vineyard newspapers in protest and resentment of the crowds. (p.112)

The close quarters of the Campground, where the most mundane domestic activity would be open to public scrutiny, along with the existing social norms of the rest of Oak Bluffs made for an exaggerated response. Just as in the previous century, the Campground built a fence to keep the secular world at bay, the residents of Oak Bluffs and the town officialdom chose to crack down. Bayne goes on to describe one element of the response:
These letters which did not mention race, led to an appeal to the Steamship Authority to restrict its ferry reservation (a requirement for those driving vehicles onto the island) standby policies to weekdays. The Steamship Authority eliminated standby boarding on Saturdays and Sundays which meant those who wished to visit the Island had to make winter reservations for their automobiles to get on a ferry, rather than drive to Woods Hole on a holiday Saturday and just hope for the best. (p.112)

Bayne notes that some members the black community of Oak Bluffs defended the revelers in the local press, "It was primarily black letter writers, who identified themselves as older than the partygoers, and in some instances, activists and local NAACP leaders who wrote letters defending the Fourth of July set as well-mannered, professional, and unfairly singled out because of their race." (p.112) That defense was not universal, nor did that fact go unnoticed. As the controversy continued into the 1990s, one of Jill Nelson's respondents, Charles J. Ogletree Jr., a professor at Harvard Law School commented,

The one disappointment was the reaction most islanders, and even African-American islanders had to the influx of young black people during the Fourth of July weekend in the late 1990s. I thought it was a wonderful thing that young black professionals had chosen Martha's Vineyard, of all places in the world they could go, as the place they wanted to spend some time. They weren't violent, drunk, or gang members, but the idea of three thousand black young people showing up one weekend terrified and froze many people. (p.182-183)

With exclusionary boundary work in play, too many members of the community, for Ogletree, felt the need to keep the "iconic ghetto" at bay.
The Nineties

Benchmarks  
Summer Population of Martha’s Vineyard: 72,000
  Percent of African American Population in U.S. Over 25 Having Completed College: 13.3%
  Minimum Household Income for Top 20% of U.S. Households: $65,124
  Percent of African American Households with Household Income of $100K+: 10.5%
(from the Vineyard Gazette and the U.S. Census)

Personal Connections: A Place of One’s Own

One August, Elaine Pinderhughes came by the house when my family was there, to ask my mother if she ever put up guests or rented the house. Elaine was planning a large birthday celebration for her husband Charles over Labor Day Weekend and needed more space to put up relatives than her house on Samoset could provide. The family Elaine wanted my mother to house was that of her nephew John Pinderhughes. When Elaine mentioned that they lived in New York, my mother asked where. On 111th Street near Broadway was Elaine’s response. They had two girls, an older child who attended Hunter College Elementary school and a younger child who was going to start there in the Fall. My mother responded that her son (me) and his family lived at 109th & Broadway and that her granddaughter was also going to be starting at Hunter in the Fall.

Within the black middle-class community of Manhattan, Hunter was where you wanted to send your bright, verbal five-year-old, and if that child were accepted you would never have to look for another school again as those admitted went straight through high school. Black women on the street or in the playground, impressed with my daughter’s directness and verbal skills would say unsolicited, “That child should go to Hunter.” With a black principal and admissions director, an admissions policy based on testing the child as opposed to selecting the parents, and a student population that was 25 percent African American, Hunter was considered a safe pathway for black educational achievement. As a
tuition-free selective public school, parents also felt that their children would be free from the influence of New York’s wealthiest families whose children filled the ranks of the city’s private or “independent” schools. The exclusivity and lack of tuition also made the school a haven for middle-class families overwhelmed by the notion of paying independent school prices without the possibility of financial aid.

After a lifetime of seasonal isolation, I now found myself and my family in the middle of a black middle-class social network that seamlessly connected life on the mainland with life in Oak Bluffs. As Upper Westsiders of a certain race and class we now began encountering similar families in schools such as Westside Montessori and Hunter, cultural activities such as the Dance Theater of Harlem, and in youth sports leagues. With my wife’s work schedule as a dresser on Broadway working nights and weekends, I was the one who went to PTA meetings, took the kids to practices and games, and went to all the weekend birthday parties, connecting with a world of other black families that did not exist in Princeton or State College. With my daughter and her cadre of black Hunter classmates and their families we navigated being black and middle class, and then black and affluent together. I embraced the role as an advocate for these children in their school, we rejected as a family the outdated color-consciousness and rigidity of Dance Theater of Harlem, and I coached more youth sports teams than I can remember.

During my daughter’s kindergarten year at Hunter, my mother’s health began to fail. A persistent cough turned out to be lung cancer. She still drove “up to the Bluffs” in early June and was excited to have my brother’s family visiting over the Fourth of July. Neil and Rose Patton were there as well, along with their daughter Marjul and her son Austin, who was named after my grandfather Curtis. My mother faded quickly after taking her grandson and Austin to the fireworks in Edgartown. I got a call from my brother informing me that our mother was now in hospice at the Martha’s Vineyard hospital. My daughter and I took a plane from Newark, while my wife finished-out the week at work. Going to the Vineyard by plane seemed so simple. The plane flew above Interstate 95 as far as New London, cut
across Narragansett Bay flying over Newport, Rhode Island, and then made a slight right-hand turn over open water. In a matter of minutes, we saw the red cliffs of Gay Head, and we were making our final approach to the Martha’s Vineyard Airport.

My mother’s friend and lawyer came up from New Haven the next day. My mother, the lawyer said, was worried about what would happen to the house. She wanted to make sure that my brother and I kept the house in the family, so my mother and her lawyer had arranged for the house to be held in trust for her grandchildren. My brother and I were each trustees to be joined by each grandchild at the age of twenty-one and we were prevented from selling the house until my soon-to-be first-grader finished college. We had inherited the house, and with it, a lifestyle neither of us could afford; and like so many other inheritors in Oak Bluffs, what had originally been a family retreat, was now about to become a commercial enterprise. More and more of the houses in Oak Bluffs are now owned by trusts, as families try to ensure succession to the next generation. A quick perusal of the Oak Bluffs tax records shows that nearly a quarter of all the privately held homes in the neighborhood (75 out of 307) are now owned by trusts, as families try ensure succession to the next generation.


My mother died that weekend. We put together a memorial service at a local funeral home with Joseph Evans, a minister and neighbor from Indianapolis who we had known since childhood, officiating. The religious element was more for my mother’s friends and neighbors than it was for my family. So many of the women from the neighborhood helped, offering food and rides to the ferry and to the airport. One of them, Lois Lippman, a Polar Bear, said that she handled rentals on the side, mostly by word of mouth. If we wanted, she could find people to rent the house for the rest of the summer, and that is what we did. When I got back to New York, I wanted to write thank you notes to all who had helped and had come to the service. I had taken the local phone book with me. The names were all there with their
street addresses, not their Post Office box numbers. I called the Oak Bluffs post office and the man who answered the phone said not to worry. He knew them all and their box numbers. After all, they had all walked to the Post Office every day but Sunday for more years than he could remember.

After my mother died, and with the time constraints of a two-income household and a wife who only got paid when she went to work, we managed to be in Oak Bluffs for a maximum of two weeks a summer, usually in mid-August for the fireworks, Illumination Night and the fair. In an environment like Oak Bluffs built on casual play rather than more structured activities, we often chose to invite other families from New York to join us. We invited one family after having met the dad and his daughter in a local sandbox. Other families came from schools or sports teams. The consistency of playing as a child with the same kids summer after summer was gone, but the casual organic interactions remained. My brother, with a second wife and a second son, managed to spend two weeks at the house in July. His younger son was between the ages of Hurmie’s two granddaughters and for the next decade or so they played together every summer. The two girls were the last I knew who would stay in Oak Bluffs all summer. Even after my brother moved to California, he and his family would return every July.

The seamlessness of life in New York and our weeks in Oak Bluffs struck me late one August when, after choosing to head the Hunter Elementary School PTA, I was falling behind in organizing the Parent’s Night in early September. How, I thought, could I reach the parents I needed to talk to about organizing the event without disrupting our family vacation? Over the next few days I ran into every black parent I needed to talk to on the beach at the end of the block. Whether it was when they were with their children on the beach to the left of the jetty, or without their children at the Inkwell to the right, they were all there. I was also able to introduce the parents of prospective students to current Hunter parents. All these interactions were unplanned. I did not know that any of these families would be staying in Oak Bluffs at the same time. A family vacation the last two weeks of August is one of the
markers of middle-class and affluent life in New York City. With no school, two income households
depend on summer camps, whether day or sleep-away, to occupy their children over the summer, and
almost all of these camps end the second week of August. Whether the vacation time or the end of
camp came first I can't say, but the number of late-August New York vacationers is undeniable. Oak
Bluffs during the last two weeks of August, to this day, is packed with families of means. In the nineties,
í would see kids that I had coached eating dinner with their families, riding the carousel at the Flying
Horses, or spending the day enjoying the ocean surf at South Beach with their grandmothers. These
families were not owners. They were most likely renters who were paying a premium to be in Oak Bluffs
for the two most popular weeks of the summer. These were the weeks everyone wanted and these
families were paying rents we not only couldn't afford, but as inheritors we couldn't turn down. To pay
the taxes and to pay for all the other expenses that came with owning and maintaining an unwinterized
summer house, we had to give up going in August to keep the house.
Chapter 5: Oak Bluffs in the Twenty-first Century

Benchmarks

- Summer Population of Martha’s Vineyard: 105,624
- Percent of African American Population in U.S. Over 25 Having Completed College: 18.5%
- Minimum Household Income for to 20% of U.S. Households in 2000: $81,766
- Minimum Household Income for to 20% of U.S. Households in 2010: $100,000
- Minimum Household Income for to 20% of U.S. Households in 2015: $117,002
- Percent of African American Households with Household Income of $100K+ in 2015: 13.9%

(from the Vineyard Gazette and the U.S. Census)

Real Estate: Asset Retention and Acquisition

My sense of time collapses after my mother’s death, with more infrequent visits to Oak Bluffs. Issues and themes come to exist out of time and as inheritors and owners, the issue and theme that dominates is real estate. In the 1980s the black community of Oak Bluffs started to divide itself into three classes of people: those who inherited houses that they rent most of the summer, those who rent, staying for one or two weeks, preferably in August, and those who have recently purchased homes that can be used year-round. These were strictly real estate divisions, which did not reflect one’s income, for many a renter made more than the owner they were renting from. My brother and I fell into the first group, as did the Finleys next door. Skip Finley describes in Jill Nelson’s book how inheritors like us relate to Oak Bluffs,

The only time I did not come here was when I could not, and that was either work-related, or financial. I could always come because my family always had a house, but I couldn’t take the whole summer off. I had a little one-week or two-week vacation. That’s one thing I laugh about now in hindsight; virtually half the property in this town is owned by people who only live here
two weeks a year. People talk about “my summerhouse.” It’s not your summerhouse, it’s your

two-week house, or it’s your one-week house. (p. 204)

In addition to staying in the old family homes of the inheritors, the renters also now had a new class of

collection in Oak Bluffs built specifically for them. The old Sea View Hotel across the street from the

Inkwell was finally torn down, and in 1989 it was replaced by the Sea View Condominiums, a three-story

modern structure right on Sea View Avenue, built for the summer rental market. The units were

purchased as commercial ventures, never really lived-in by their owners. With its outdoor hallways

facing an asphalt parking lot, built where one of the old Victorians on Pennacook once stood, it was as

practical and charming as a chain motel. The units had modern kitchens, not found in most of the old

Victorians, along with views of the Sound, and free beach access right across the street. The Sea View

Condominiums became the two-week destination for many, including our friends from the sandbox.

Between 1996 and 2003, four houses were also torn down on Pequot Avenue, one block over. They

were replaced by two-family houses expressly built for the rental market. Even with their wood frame

construction, they were out of place with the rest of the neighborhood, as contemporary zoning laws

mandated a front lawn and a deep set-back from the street, that conformed with a suburban notion of

home construction. These lawns are now dominated by gravel driveways and operate as a physical

barrier preventing any casual interaction with those walking to or from the beach or walking into town.

Those four houses were the only ones of its kind, as so little of the lot was left for the house itself. For

corner lots in particular, the set-back requirements were so severe that one location at the corner of

Waban and Narragansett has remained vacant long after the demolition of the original house. Double

set-backs left almost no room for a house at all.

For the inheritors and others who rent out their homes, there is always pressure to provide a level of

contemporary comfort the renters enjoy in their mainland homes. Modern kitchens equipped with
dishwashers and microwaves, washers and dryers, flat-screen TVs with premium cable and wifi are all minimum requirements. Lately, having an outside shower has joined the list of must-haves. Every off-season comes with its own financial calculation as to what a renter paying top dollar for a week or two in Oak Bluffs considers a necessity compared to what the owner can afford. I remember talking to the cable guy one Memorial Day weekend while he was upgrading our cable service for the new flat-screen in the living room and adding a line for a second TV in my grandfather’s old study. He remarked at how calm I was compared to his usual service call during the summer. I replied that if you were paying $4,500 a week for a house in August, and you had small children, and it was raining all day, a service call from the cable company was, indeed, an emergency.

I often commiserate with one of my neighbors about keeping up with the renters. He too, got a new flat-screen TV and the summer before me had an outdoor shower built in the back. A new kitchen would have to wait, he said, and if the renters don’t like it, they can pay thousands more to have everything they have at home. Another neighbor told me that he carefully pre-screens his renters. He doesn’t use a broker and carefully describes his house as a “cottage” without most of the modern conveniences to his potential renters. Ideally, those who want and like it that way are happy and often become repeat renters, taking the same week or weeks each summer, developing the same bond with house and place that he has.

Those with money from the third class, the acquirers, did manage to restore some of the Victorians to their original glory. The software developer Peter Norton, and his African American wife, purchased two of them. The first, on Ocean Park, was the Corbin House, which was in disrepair from the early years of my childhood until the Nortons first restored it in 1996. This is the largest and grandest house on the park circle. It fulfilled all the suburban requirements with a large side lawn behind a wrought iron fence complete with a gazebo. A large deck overlooked the lawn where the Nortons hosted their annual
fireworks party in August. In concert with the old style, all the guests on the side deck were visible from the street, both viewers and viewed during the show. The house also had the traditional front porch, presenting a welcoming public face to the community. So welcoming, in fact, that there is now a sign on the front steps that reads, “Private Home” to prevent new arrivals to Oak Bluffs from trying to check in. Charene Sherrard-Johnson discusses the house with Adelaide Cromwell in her book on Dorothy West:

At one point during my interview with Dr. Adelaide Cromwell I impulsively remarked that the large green house on Ocean Park was one of my favorites. She immediately frowned and said something along the lines of “Oh, you like that house, do you?” Owned by Peter Norton of the Norton Anti-virus Software, the house is evidently too large, too garish, and not authentically restored. Yet I still find its attempt to be authentic rather striking. Even Cromwell acknowledges that he reportedly researched the historical accuracy of the home’s exterior paint: an olive green with maroon trim. Perhaps to an outsider, the Norton House represents a fantasy of Vineyard life, while to islander the expense of its transformation speaks only to a nostalgic loss, a remembrance of what is no longer there. (p.157)

The second Norton house, across the street from the new construction on Pequot, called the Cinderella Cottage more explicitly invokes the outsider fantasy. Complete with its turret, manicured flower beds leading to the front porch, and its multi-colored paint job displayed under floodlights, the Cinderella Cottage is a celebration of the old Oak Bluffs, looked at but not lived.

Just as the acquirers could restore old Victorians, more enterprising owners found ways to meld the mores of the past as expressed through Oak Bluffs architecture with the values of the present. Diagonally across from our house on Pennacook was the old Powell house. After it was willed to Howard University, the house fell into disrepair. One summer all that was left of the house was one corner turret. An article in the Vineyard Gazette on the Copeland Plan District from 1996 refers to both
the plight of some of the older homes and the expensive solutions some new owners found. Quoting a
town selectman at the time, the Gazette reports, “I think over the next five to 10 years, you’re going to
see people, at an increasing rate knocking down houses. I’ve seen a lot of houses that nobody
maintains. Some people have inherited them. They get to the point where they are beyond repair.”
(Guzman, p.8) The article goes on to specifically talk about the old Powell house and one Oak Bluffs
resident’s reaction to the new project:

One day Mr. Penn, who lives on Ocean Park, was driving by Waban Park and noticed that one of
his favorite houses was gone, except for a single tower. It used to be a 14-bedroom yellow low
house built about 100 years ago.

The new owners tore the house down because it was beyond repair, architects said. They plan
to renovate the tower which will be part of a new Victorian, similar to the one that was
demolished. The entire project was reviewed in the context of the Copeland guidelines,
according to the architects and the minutes from the zoning board of appeals. (Guzman, p.8)

Because the project was technically a renovation using the existing turret as the basis, the new
construction was exempt from the current zoning laws. The new yellow house on the corner, much like
the restored Norton House, had the social connection to the street of the old combined with the
comfort of the new. A neighbor and respondent of mine identified the owner as a black entrepreneur
from Northern Virginia who owned multiple McDonalds restaurants in the D.C. area. According to the
Oak Bluffs Tax Assessors database the current assessed value of the yellow house on the corner is over
Few acquirers possessed the vision, ingenuity, and resources to merge the traditional Oak Bluffs lifestyle with the level of comfort and luxury found in contemporary homes. Just as the suburbs provided new housing opportunities to the developing middle class in the 1960s, the suburbs of Oak Bluffs provided the same to the emerging affluents of the 1980s and beyond. The 1980s marked a major shift in both the real estate market and in summer visitation patterns. New construction began in several housing developments outside of Oak Bluffs. New year-round homes were being built in Oak Bluffs’ own suburbs. These homes offered space, privacy and year-round use, making the latest status symbol: Thanksgiving on the Vineyard a reality, and making the idea of retiring on the Vineyard possible as well.

The new developments, with names such as Farm Neck, Waterview Farms, Meadowview Farms and Tower Ridge, not unlike Park Forest Village outside of State College, all stressed their rural origins. The new developments outside of Oak Bluffs also touted their proximity to local golf courses, as golf had replaced tennis as the social sport of choice. According to the Tax Assessors database, construction began on Farm Neck in 1985, on Waterview Farms in 1984, Meadowview Farms in 1987, and Tower Ridge in 1986. The current assessed value of homes in Farm Neck range from 1.3 million dollars for one built in 1987 to one currently valued at nearly 5 million dollars. The land for that property was first sold in 1985 for $106,000, repurchased in 1998 for $505,000 and had a house built on it in 1999. Homes in Waterview Farms now have assessed values ranging from $590,000 to $1 Million. The homes in Meadowview Farms range in current assessed value from a low of $554,000 to a high of over 2 million dollars.

Jill Nelson’s respondents, many of whom purchased in the 1950s and 1960s, also felt the pressure from rising real estate values. Mildred Henderson, who started coming to Oak Bluffs in 1955, first stayed with the Finleys on Pequot, (p.185) She then purchased her house along with her sisters: Ruth Bonaparte and Kathy Allen. All three, like Hurmie Thorne now split their time between Oak Bluffs and Sarasota, Florida. According to Henderson, “We bought the house, and decided maybe we’d better have a vote and decide
what to do with it. The husbands and Kathy voted to have a guest house, so for ten years exactly, from 1956 until 1966 that’s what we did, we ran a guest house. Once it was paid for, we said, This is it. This is now a family home.” (p.187) When interviewed by Nelson in the early 2000s, Henderson spoke to what the rising real estate values had done,

We would not be able to buy this house now, absolutely not. We don’t even know if our children will be able to maintain what we have gotten, and that’s true for many people we know. We were just curious, and a few years ago we had a realtor come over. He poked around and into all the nooks and crannies, and told us that we could get $700,000 for this house.

(p.192)

Another of Nelson’s respondents, a former New York City schoolteacher and an original Cottager, (p.233) noted how real estate prices had changed who could become an owner, “I couldn’t afford this house if I was buying it today. I think that’s true for many people who bought a house here before the 1980s. The prices are no longer for middle-class people.” (p.236) Norman Hall is unique among Nelson’s respondents. He is someone who came to Oak Bluffs as a child and became both a year-round resident and an acquirer (p.263). He describes how broader economic opportunity and the rise of real estate values had changed, by the early 2000s who could afford to buy. “There’s an influx of money here: old money, new money, high-tech money, and Hollywood. Our parents were professionals – doctors, lawyers, and engineers, those were the people who bought here. Now it’s kind of changed, so if you’re not a corporate CEO, actor, or someone who’s making millions, it’s very difficult to live on this island.” (p.266) Nelson herself notes that, “Now it is virtually impossible for a working-class or middle-class family to purchase a home on the Vineyard. Cottages that were purchased for four or five figures thirty, forty, fifty years ago are now worth upwards of half a million dollars.” (p.274)
As second-generation inheritors, my brother and I wonder whether our children will be able to keep the house. When my wife and I were exploring payment options for our daughter’s college, we further learned about the pressure on inheritors, and how much money a potential acquirer would need to purchase the house in Oak Bluffs. To colleges, the house was an asset to be used to pay for college, despite the restrictions places on its sale by the trust. The house could not be sold before my mother’s youngest grandchild at the time of her death was old enough to have finished college. With changes in mortgage law, as an unwinterized second home held in trust, no bank would offer a mortgage. In any event, my wife and I did not want to further financially encumber our children and my brother’s children with year-round mortgage payments on top of the costs of maintaining the house once it became their responsibility. Who, then, could afford to buy our house on Pennacook? Someone who could pay in cash. And if they could afford to do that, why would they limit themselves to a home they could use only a quarter of the year? The people Norman Hall described would want something they could use year-round or something they would only rent for the prime time they wanted. Old Victorian Oak Bluffs had become a place where one either rented from someone who could not afford to be there themselves, or a place where one could spend a considerable sum of money to own and convert one of the old houses into a year-round vacation home.

A Place of Refuge and Racial Construction Site

Even as the economic status of those who come has changed, along with the cost and duration of the vacation stay, two elements of the black Oak Bluffs experience have remained the same through the years. The black community of Oak Bluffs still functions as a refuge from the white world and as a safehaven for black child development. From the earliest days, with Dorothy West’s invocation of “security and serenity,” Oak Bluffs has provided a space for middle-class and affluent African Americans to be themselves. As Jill Nelson points out in her introduction to Finding Martha’s Vineyard,
There is no need to be the exemplary Negro here, or to show white people that we were as good as or better than they were, to conduct ourselves as ambassadors for integration and racial harmony. For the months of the summer the weight of being race representative — and all the political, emotional, and psychic burdens that come with demanding that an individual represent a nonexistent monolith — was lifted. (p. 4-5)

Robert C. Hayden, who has written his own book about the black community of Oak Bluffs, when interviewed by Nelson adds his own take on Oak Bluffs as a refuge:

The great majority of the blacks who come here are working in white America. And it’s still very difficult out there, there are still a lot of subtle things you have to deal with. Whether you’re working for a newspaper, a bank, or government, it’s very difficult for middle and upper-income blacks working in the public or private sector. There’s a lot of pressure out there, and this is a way, as it was fifty and one hundred years ago to get away from all of that. (p.60)

The security and serenity comes from a conscious concentration of people who have shared a similar experience. Another of Nelson’s respondents, Tonya Lewis Lee, an attorney, television producer, and wife of filmmaker Spike Lee, (p.81) adds, “I have to say that spending summers here is almost a reprieve. Coming here is like a breath of fresh air, where there are people who are like me, who have similar experiences, and you don’t have to go through that translation, that cultural barrier.” (p.82) Charles Ogletree sums up how Oak Bluffs has functioned as a place of refuge when he tells Nelson, “It really seemed like a place where black people could just be themselves and not worry about who they were talking to, where they were, or what they were doing. A place where black people could just sit back, think, and enjoy one another and leave here inspired to do something.” (p.182)
The writer Touré captures the sense of security Oak Bluffs provides to those climbing in the mainstream in an article published “New York Magazine” prior to the Obamas first presidential vacation in 2009. After referencing the black community’s origins at Shearer Cottage, Touré writes,

Only a few dozen blacks visited the island at the time, but over the years Oak Bluffs has become the summer meeting place for scores of what could be called the Only Ones – black professional and social elites who travel in worlds where they’re often the only black person in the room. The Only Ones typically break into fields that admit few blacks, move into neighborhoods where few blacks live, and send their kids to mostly white schools. They are not running from their own – they’re chasing after the best they can get. They aren’t assimilationist; they’re ascensionist. (p.2)

“In Oak Bluffs,” according to Touré, “the Only Ones become one of many.” (p.2) What is unique and unexpected about black Oak Bluffs as a refuge, is that at no point in its history has Oak Bluffs been a predominantly black community. With a black population that never exceeded 35 percent, those vacationing there exhibit many of the behaviors and attitudes Karyn Lacy associates with her predominantly-black D.C. suburbs. A balance has somehow been achieved in Oak Bluffs where black people are present in sufficient numbers to feel safe while not crossing any threshold that would instigate while flight. What Touré points out, and what proved to be a controversial assertion in his article, is that the black community of Oak Bluffs achieves its level of comfort and security through conscious isolation from the white world. Touré also quotes Skip Finley who says, “There’s not a lot of overlap between black and white.” Touré observes, “It’s an arrangement that springs largely from the self-segregating impulse among black Vineyarders, who have come to the island to connect with each other.” (p.2) The lack of worry, the sense of belonging and the conscious pursuit of leisure are all part of the black Oak Bluffs experience, an experience that infuses the whole community from the retirees, to
the young professionals who share a house for a week, to the new arrivals who have spent close to a million dollars for a year-round retreat.

All the groups mentioned above see a special value in what Oak Bluffs gives to their children and grandchildren. How Oak Bluffs plays into black racial construction closely mirrors Karyn Lacy’s observations of what she calls “status reproduction” in the D.C. suburbs. The black community of Oak Bluffs provides middle-class and affluent African Americans with an informal and unstructured environment for children to interact with children like themselves. For my brother and me, it was the only place we had this kind of interaction until we went away to school in our mid-to late teens.

Stephen Carter, a professor at Yale Law School and one of Jill Nelson’s respondents explains his dilemma as a parent, “One of the really hard things about raising African-American children, especially if you’re middle class, is having them grow up around enough African-American families. Especially where there are similar values and there are kids they can talk to comfortably.” (p226) Like Lacy’s respondents who live in the predominantly-white D.C. suburb in her study, Carter relies on formal interactions through social organizations, which in Carter’s case is Jack and Jill. He views the formal interactions Jack and Jill provides for his children in the following way, “So many of the organizations that exist in the African-American community exist to try to do that work. Our kids are in Jack and Jill. There’s no other reason to join Jack and Jill but to do that and that’s very important.’ (p.226) As Lacy points out for her respondents who live in predominantly-black communities, the experience their children have learning to be black is organic and unspoken. Carter acknowledges the difference when he compares the Jack and Jill experience to a week or two spent in Oak Bluffs, “But going to a Jack and Jill meeting once a month and then going to the regional conference once a year is not the same as spending weeks and weeks in a resort where you’ll meet some of the same people and also some new people every day.” (p.226) Touré points out the important role the black community of Oak Bluffs plays for its children as straddlers,
The Only Ones deal with glass ceilings at work, unfortunate misunderstanding in their
neighborhoods, condescension from blacks who think their education or class makes them
inauthentic, an identity crises for their kids. When they get to their Vineyard vacation homes,
they want to escape that casual, institutional, and intra-black racism, and be around people who
help them feel less anomalous. (p.3)

Norman Hall, who spent summers in Oak Bluffs as a child and now lives on the island fulltime, explains
to Nelson what being a child here means,

About ten years ago I started looking for something different for my children. A place where
they could be free, could be creative, and basically not just be put in a box.

My first thought was, as a child, where did I have my best memories and my dearest
friendships? The things that breed happiness and give you the feeling that you are valued? And
all of these feelings that I had within me were based upon summers on the Vineyard. (p.263)

Oak Bluffs has similar value and meaning to my children and to my brother’s children. It was the place
they went to recharge and reconnect. It was the place where they could go out the kitchen door in the
morning and just be a kid. It was a place where they would connect with their family and their families’
history, from the Pattons, to Grandma Jeanne and Grandpa Charlie, all the way back to Great Grandma
Fannie. It was and still is, on the shoulders of summer, the place where they can walk around the corner
or across the street and visit people they have known their whole lives.

The Iconic Oak Bluffs

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the black community of Oak Bluffs has consciously begun
to recognize its status as an elite community culturally as well as economically. Its summer residents
have embraced with renewed vigor, their role as the vanguard of black achievement. In addition to
relaxing and recharging its residents now take time to put their lives into a broader social context. Every August there are now panel discussions hosted by black Oak Bluffs academics, book signings by black Oak Bluffs authors, and screenings of the work of black Oak Bluffs filmmakers. Alison Stewart references one such panel held in honor of the Dunbar High School class of 1930 (Stewart, p179) and did her own book signing for her book on Dunbar at the Oak Bluffs Public Library. Stanley Nelson, the documentary filmmaker and brother of Jill, whose work includes “The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution” and “Freedom Riders” had a screening of “A Place of Our Own”, a film about the black community of Oak Bluffs at the Island movie house at the foot of Circuit Avenue where Linky Pope directed traffic. There is now since 2002, a Martha’s Vineyard African American Film Festival where a documentary on Angela Davis was shown with the subject in attendance.

With the arrival of the Obamas, there were numerous articles in the popular press bringing the community into the cultural mainstream. Local luminaries such as Vernon Jordan (of Lazard Frères and golf partner to presidents), Valerie Jarrett (Senior Advisor to the President), the journalist Charlene Hunter-Gault, and Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. were interviewed along with Jill Nelson and her brother Stanley. The quick journalistic once-overs get the basics. A “Washington Post” piece notes the panels and panelists (Brown, 2009) as does a piece in “Town & Country”. (Carter, 2016) As a result of this added exposure and a shift in values that recognizes leisure as a just reward for economic success, the black community of Oak Bluffs has achieved iconic status. As noted by Dorothy West’s biographer Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, “There is a celebration of leisure on Oak Bluffs; the ability to relax on one’s seaside porch is in itself a breaking of racial barriers.” (p.35) She recalls a moment her husband had on one of these porches involving a passing tour bus filled with predominantly-black passengers,

Upon seeing my husband in repose on the porch, several tourists gave him a Black Power salute, which he returned. Why offer an impromptu, outdated, nationalist response to affirm an
ultimately bourgeois act? That the twenty-first century spectacle of a black man engaging in a leisure activity on a porch within sight and steps of the Inkwell prompts not condemnation, but affirmation, illustrates that black nationalist desires manifest a complex tension among separatism, self-determination, and assimilation. (p35-36)

In Sherrard-Johnson’s observation we find the iconic Oak Bluffs, the counter-weight to Anderson’s iconic ghetto, the symbolic place where, as Sherrard-Johnson concludes, “The persistent return of black vacationers is not a demand for integrationist inclusion. It is a claim of entitlement.” (p.36)

For those of us who are inheritors, who can only fleetingly experience this place on the shoulders of the summer season, we recognize that ownership comes with a certain responsibility. In a sense, we are the curators of the black community of Oak Bluffs. We remember its past and seek to preserve our place in its future. My mother, when considering renting the house for the first time, assembled a montage of family photos and placed them on the front staircase. There stood my father the army captain and college professor next to her parents vacationing at Arundel-on-the-Bay. There she stood with her children and grandchildren guarding the house, letting whoever came her know whose house this was and where we came from. The montage is gone now. The photos too old and curled to be on display, but we do have photos of her grandchildren on the mantel so that our renters will know whose house it will be.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

What kind of knowing have I gained from the study of the black community of Oak Bluffs? How has its meaning changed for those who go and have gone there? How has my personal sense of belonging evolved over the past sixty years?

The rise in economic opportunity and the growth of black consciousness that begins in the late 1960s created a black Oak Bluffs community that is both wider and deeper than what had come before. Those who go there are not just Bostonians or New Yorkers or members of select clubs. Over time, the black community of Oak Bluffs has come to include more variation in income, length of stay, and type of housing. Some newcomers have sought and attained a more suburban experience, living in developments on the edge of town, choosing a lifestyle much closer in terms of space and privacy to the mainland norm. Distinct classes based on time of home purchase have emerged, with those who have inherited houses in more modest times sharing space with new acquirers, flexing their economic muscle. In between those two groups are the renters, whose level of income makes it possible for many an inheritor to hang on to their homes.

Those who come now are more connected to and less challenged by black popular culture with basketball overtaking tennis as Niantic Park’s sport of choice. Like their predecessors, they are still seeking a safe harbor from the negative stereotypes of white America. With increased participation in the economic and cultural mainstream, those who come now bring more money, but have less of a sense of a shared community of individual families. Replacing that intimacy is an idea of place, the iconic Oak Bluffs. It is here where children bond with children they have never met, because they have a sense that they have met someone just like them. It is here where adults can frankly talk about the struggle to rise, flourish, and nurture in a world that still doubts their worth. In the iconic Oak Bluffs, stereotypes are broken while authenticity is maintained.
There are two times of the year when the inheritors and the acquirers come together: Memorial Day and Columbus Day weekends. It is over Memorial Day weekend that the inheritors open their houses for the season, assess the damage from the previous winter, inspect any off-season projects, or do their own work on their homes. Acquirers, whose winterized homes are not in need of such spring cleaning, come to enjoy the quiet of this shoulder-season holiday. Except for the new phenomenon of the bachelorette party, Oak Bluffs seems almost free of renters. We talk across porches and get to know any new owners who may have purchased over the winter. One new set of owners has bought the house from the Thomases. They are a white family from Massachusetts and are much more affluent than the Ritters or Vogles from my youth. They plan to rent the house in August and hope to be able to use the house in July, during shoulder-season and on weekends during the year. We are invited over to see what they have done with the house. Our contractor, who has come by to discuss the off-season work comes along as well. He had done the work for the Thomases, installing a heating system after the Ritters sold, and he wants to see how his work has held up. The new owner marvels at a small room off the dining room, especially designed to house Mr. Thomas' audio equipment.

The house next door has new owners as well. They are from California where they have just moved from London. The husband is Italian and in software. The wife is African American and she is so excited to be living closer to Oak Bluffs, though London and California each seem equally far away to me. The owners from the block have all gathered on the street in front of their house to watch landscapers lay a sod lawn beside the house. They have two small children who can’t wait to run and roll on the new grass. “It won’t last,” someone says. The soil is too sandy, unless of course they install in-ground sprinklers like the yellow house on the corner.

Glenn Finley is there. His wife and daughter arrived earlier, walking-on the ferry because they were too late for their car reservation. To kill time before he can get on another boat, Glenn drove to a nursery
on the Cape and bought hydrangeas. He wants to plant them on either side of the fence between our yards and we spend the afternoon together digging holes and scrounging-up old nails. The rust, he says, will help make the blooms turn blue, the color he and I like best. He lives in Stamford, Connecticut and has a law practice in The Bronx. His wife jokes about living in the suburbs. She says she ran a stop sign a couple of weeks ago and was pulled over by a local cop. She rolled down the window and had both arms extended out the window. “Is your husband on the job?” he asked (code for being a police officer). “No,” she said, “he’s a criminal defense attorney.” We all laugh and then talk about our kids.

More important is Columbus Day, when there is less work to be done. My son sometimes comes with me, but not this year. I almost prefer going by myself. When I am here alone I best process all my time in Oak Bluffs. This past October I see a mixed-race family on the boat with the daughter still in her soccer uniform and the white mom holding a dog on its leash. We split a cab to Oak Bluffs from Vineyard Haven. The dad asks me how long I have been coming to Oak Bluffs. I say, “My whole life.” He says, “The same.” He is related to the Shearers of Shearer Cottage. The family had just been in D.C. for the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. They had donated several items for the exhibit on Oak Bluffs and his family had been invited for the festivities. They have truly curated the Oak Bluffs experience for the wider world. We talk about the people we might have in common and we come up empty. When the van pulls up to my side door on Waban, the mom exclaims that I live right next door to the Finleys and across the street from the Thornes. “The girls play together all the time,” she says, “Have done so for years.” Some of the old ways still survive.

I talk to a neighbor who is a friend of mine from New York. Our daughters played soccer together in the city. I ask him what off-season projects he is considering and who might have the name of a new plumber or roofer. I go to his house for dinner, as he still has a working fireplace and has a houseful of guests. We eat fresh salmon off the grill and then the talk turns to Sunday afternoon. Every Sunday of
Columbus Day Weekend seemingly all of black Oak Bluffs goes to the Inkwell to eat and socialize. For decades, folks would bring all the food that was left in their fridges down to the sidewalk along the Inkwell for a big community pot luck. Now someone rents a truck that serves as an open bar and the food isn’t the remains of summer kitchens, but is bought new for the occasion. This year, there are grills and gumbo over cans of sterno. There are cold salads of every kind and tables of sweets. Folks are wearing their old college gear, which identifies both school and Greek affiliation. One of my friend’s guests says she can’t drink in public wearing her sorority “colors.” Glenn Finley is there with his wife. His daughter and her crew will be by later, he says. I see the parents from the van. Their daughter is with the same crew and is supposed to stop by before they all head out to some party. The mom talks about their older daughter, a freshman a Howard, and how the first month is going.

I see my contractor from last Spring, microphone in hand, being trailed by a cameraman. He is recoding the event for the island’s public access TV station. There are the usual assortment of judges, doctors and finance types in attendance with an array of expensive cars parked along Sea View Avenue and half way up Tuckernuck. All along the seawall are a line of benches. On this day, they are all filled with people holding paper plates and plastic cups, reminiscing, making new friends, and networking in the new style. If you were to look closely, you would see that see bench has a plaque. Each bench is dedicated to a family, a couple, or an individual now passed, who is still remembered, still a part of Oak Bluffs. There is a plaque for Ewell and Millie Finley. There is one for the Polar Bears and one for Lois Lippman, which says, “It’s going to be a beach day.” So many benches. So many names. The Inkwell on Columbus Day represents the permanence of the Oak Bluffs black community, with the benches serving as its physical embodiment for all to see.

I started to think about how my sense of belonging has changed through the years from the isolation of childhood assimilation to the inclusiveness of an adult life in a more racially balanced world. The value
of the black community of Oak Bluffs has grown in my eyes and in the eyes of my family. My children are connected to the black world in ways that I was not, and to them, the black community of Oak Bluffs is not a mystery to be solved, but the answer to a question. The question is, “Where do I belong?” and the answer is, with the sense of self this place provides, “Anywhere at all.” I start to think again of the benches. Maybe we should get one for my parents, Charlie and Jeanne, not along the seawall, but somewhere removed as they were. In Waban Park by Charlie Fisher’s bench would be the perfect spot. Who knows, maybe my kids will buy one for me. I wonder where?
Illustrations

1. Robert Holland, date unknown. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
2. Nellie Holland, date unknown. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
3. Dr. A Maurice Curtis, Jr. and Fannie Holland Curtis, date unknown.

(Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
4. Maurice and Fannie with Jeanne Curtis, fish, and friends, circa 1924.

(Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
5. Fannie, Dr. A Maurice Curtis, Sr. and Jeanne Curtis, circa 1924.

(Courtesy Charles C. Davis)

(Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
7. Summercamp Hotel, February 2017. ( Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
8. Island Movie House, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
9. Oak Bluffs Waterfront, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
10. The Norton House, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
11. Oak Bluffs Post Office, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
12. New Pequot Houses, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
13. Cottager’s Corner, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
14. Niantic Park Basketball Courts, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
15. Gold Coast Streetscape, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
(Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
17. Yellow House demolition, with Evan and Sonia Davis, circa 2002. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
18. Sea View Condominiums, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)

(Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
20. Inkwell Beach with Benches, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
21. Ewell and Millie Finley’s Bench, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
22. Lois Lippman’s Bench, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
23. 13 Pennacook, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
24. Shearer Cottage, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
25. Houses in the Campground, February 2017. (Courtesy Charles C. Davis)
Table A-2. Percent of People 25 Years and Over Who Have Completed High School or College, by Race, Hispanic
(Noninstitutionalized population)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age and Year</th>
<th>All races</th>
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<th>Non-Hispanic White</th>
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<th>Black alone or in combination</th>
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<td>Total</td>
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Notes:
/1 Starting in 2012, data were calculated using population controls based on the 2010 Census.
/2 Starting in 2003, respondents could choose more than one race. The race data in this table for White, non-Hispanic White, Black, and Asian from 2003 onward represent those respondents who indicated only one racial identity. Prior to 2003, Asians were grouped with Pacific Islanders.
/3 Starting in 2001, data were calculated using population controls based on Census 2000.
/4 Beginning with data for 1992, a new question results in different categories than for earlier years:
- is now collected in the 'Some college' and the two 'Associate degree' categories. Data shown as 'Completed 4 Years of College or more', is now collected in the categories, 'Bachelor's degree,' 'Master's degree,' 'Doctorate degree,' and 'Professional degree'. Due to the change in question format, median years
/5 Data in the column labeled "Black" include Black and other races from 1940 to 1952; from 1963 to 2003, data are for the Black population only.
- Starting in 2001, data are from the expanded CPS sample.

(noninstitutionalized population, excluding members of the Armed Forces living in barracks); 1950 Census of Population and 1940 Census of Population (resident population).
Contact: U.S. Census Bureau, Education and Social Stratification Branch, (301) 763-2464.
Table H-1. Income Limits for Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent of All Households: 1967 to 2015

(Households as of March of the following year. Income in current and 2015 CPI-U-RS adjusted dollars (28))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number (thousands)</th>
<th>Lower limit of each fifth (dollars)</th>
<th>Lower limit of top 5 percent (dollars)</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>Lowest</td>
<td>Second</td>
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<tr>
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<td>22,800</td>
<td>43,511</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>119,927</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>38,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>114,384</td>
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<td>36,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000 (30)</td>
<td>108,209</td>
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<td>33,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995 (25)</td>
<td>99,627</td>
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<td>26,914</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>94,312</td>
<td>12,500</td>
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<td>1985 (20)</td>
<td>88,458</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>82,368</td>
<td>7,478</td>
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<td>1975 (16)</td>
<td>72,867</td>
<td>5,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>64,778</td>
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<td>1967 (12)</td>
<td>60,813</td>
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<td>5,650</td>
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Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, non-sampling error, and definitions, see //www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpsmar16.pdf
Table H-17. Households by Total Money Income, Race, and Hispanic Origin of Householder: 1967 to 2015
(Income in 2015 CPI-U-RS adjusted dollars. Households as of March of the following year.)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race and Hispanic origin of householder and year</th>
<th>Number (thousands)</th>
<th>Under $15,000</th>
<th>$15,000 to $24,999</th>
<th>$25,000 to $34,999</th>
<th>$35,000 to $49,999</th>
<th>$50,000 to $74,999</th>
<th>$75,000 to $99,999</th>
<th>$100,000 to $149,999</th>
<th>$150,000 to $199,999</th>
<th>$200,000 and over</th>
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For footnotes, see www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/income/guidance/cps-historic-footnotes.html
For suggested citations, see www.census.gov/main/www/citation.html
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