The Contours of Community: the formation and maintenance of a black student community on a predominantly white campus

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ABSTRACT   *On predominantly white university campuses across the USA, the existence of black student communities is an unquestioned reality. Participants routinely self-identify as members, and university administrators acknowledge such communities' existence, along with that of other subcommunities, as a normal aspect of campus life. The common-sense assumption of subcommunities as an a priori component of student life provides a tempting but problematic starting point for analyses of students' norms, values and approaches to academics. In this article, I theorize about the formation and maintenance of black student communities on predominantly white campuses. Coming to terms with such communities is a fundamental step in understanding the academic attitudes and performance of the many African American students who consider themselves members. It is also a precursor to effective student life programming and policy development.*

On predominantly white university campuses across the USA, the existence of black student communities is an unquestioned reality. Black students maintain their own system of fraternities and sororities, have favorite gathering spaces on campus, coordinate extra-curricular activities designed to appeal to one another, and in other ways operate as a distinct subcommunity of the student body at large. Participants routinely self-identify as members of a black student community, and university administrators acknowledge the community's existence, along with that of other subcommunities, as a normal aspect of campus life.

The common-sense assumption of subcommunities as an a priori component of student life provides a tempting but problematic starting point for analyses of students' norms, values, behaviors, and, most of all, their academic achievement. After all, once we assume the existence of a community, we can compile facts and figures about group success or failure and then offer praise or condemnation as appropriate. In this way, some groups become model minorities, whose existence

validates notions about America's meritocracy, while other groups become poster-children for group-wide pathology. Recent examples of such analyses include McWhorter's exploration of the 'black achievement gap' in education (2000), as well as writings by Steele (1990, 1998), Sowell (1994), Harrison (1992), Bennett (1992), and D'Souza (1992).

In this article, I address the basic, but seldom-executed, task of theorizing about the formation and operation of the black student community. I engage a long-standing body of literature that describes the formation and maintenance of subcommunities generally, and apply it to the contemporary reality of black student life on predominantly white campuses. Coming to terms with the formation and maintenance of the subcommunity is a fundamental first step in understanding the norms, values, behaviors, and academic performance of the many African American students who consider themselves members of a black student community. It is also a precursor to effective student life programming and policy development.

In this discussion I bring together ideas of identity, dignity, status-honor, and difference and discuss them in their own right and in terms of the circumstances of black students at predominantly white Midwestern University (pseudonym)—a large state institution with roughly 1200 black students in an undergraduate population of 35,000. The range of disciplines that informs this work includes anthropology, sociology, critical race studies and philosophy, and the range of thinkers includes Benedict Anderson, Manuel Castells, Albert Cohen, W. E. B. Du Bois, Signithia Fordham, Milton Gordon, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, William James, Robert Merton, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Taylor, Max Weber and others. Ethnographic fieldwork also informs this work. This fieldwork was formally conducted from 1999 to 2001 at Midwestern University, but also bears the influence of an additional seven years on site, during which time I occupied such varied roles as fellow student, friend, tutor, mentor, or instructor to black and non-black students on campus.

Finally, as I move toward an articulated understanding of the formation and maintenance of the black student community, I simultaneously move away from explanations of contemporary black life and culture that describe African American communities as pre-existent pathological entities, the norms of which are based in the legacy of slavery and are maladaptive to contemporary circumstances (Frazier, 1939, 1949; Moynihan, 1965; Ogbu, 1990; Harrison, 1992; McWhorter, 2000). This latter body of literature is inadequate to the task of understanding contemporary community formation among black students in North American college settings to the extent that it fails to account for (1) the continual creation and re-creation of cultural norms and groups, (2) the variability in African American cultural practices over time, and (3) the existence of non-African American blacks in black student communities.

Subcommunity Formation

There are at least two primary sets of dialogic relationships through which subcommunities are formulated and reproduced. The first is that of similarly situated

individuals operating within a predominant social structure. Ordered interactions between individuals in an established social structure mark their positions within that structure. At the same time, interactions with additional environmental features provide the terms and base for their coalescence with others who share their circumstances and the 'raw materials' (Hebdige, 1979) for the rise of cultural forms specific to their emergent group. The successful coalescence of similarly situated individuals marks the advent of the subcommunity (Gordon, 1997 [1947]), while the subsequent establishment of recognizable behavioral norms, rituals and practices marks the ascendance of that subcommunity's culture.

The second set of relationships includes those of individual actors who interact with one another within the context of the subcommunity. These relationships produce the norms by which members of the subcommunity act and react, as well as the status roles through which they define their internal relations (Weber, 1993, 1999). In a basic, but nonetheless useful formulation, we can say that the subcommunity is predetermined from the outside, but is shaped, refined and finds expression from within.

Given that specific first and second order relationships determine the shape of the subcommunity, we come to the next, and perhaps more unsettling, point that the subcommunity is a fundamentally reactive entity. Despite attempts at autonomy, and despite the existence of cultural expressions and forms that may exist nowhere else, the subcommunity's very existence is a reaction to (or against) the larger social structure within which it exists (Cohen, 1997 [1955]). Of course, this does not exclude the possibility of subcommunities forged in the context of privilege and high status within a social structure—for instance, that of students who attend an elite college preparatory school and the network of teachers, staff, and families that support them. Such a subcommunity might be notable for its conformity to socially prescribed norms for success (sociologist Robert Merton's 'Cultural Goals') and the socially accepted means (Merton's 'Institutional Means') by which the goals are to be achieved (1996). Our interest, however, is with the subcommunities Merton would describe as 'rebellious'—that is, those that have such a tenuous relationship with society's broadly accepted 'goals and means' that they create alternative goals, alternative means, or both. Instead of referring to such groups as rebellious, I refer to them, in the parlance of additional classic literature, as 'resistant' (Hall, 1976; Hebdige, 1979). This terminology remains useful because it draws attention to the tensions that groups of similarly situated individuals experience as they attempt to break from a society's predominant social and cultural mores, but does not overstate their ability to succeed in this endeavor.

This resistant subcommunity can be broadly characterized as the attempt of similarly situated individuals to bring dignity to their experiences, perspectives, and existence in the face of social structures that would deny them that dignity. Dignity refers to the democratic, egalitarian principle by which all people are accorded a basic level of respect based simply upon their shared humanity. The sociologist Manuel Castells seamlessly moves us from the idea of the individual pursuit of dignity to the formation of collective resistant identities based upon the similar

predicaments of individual social actors. In Castells' words, collective resistant identities are:

> generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society. (Castells, 1997, p. 8)

That the establishment of the resistant subcommunity reflects the attempt of similarly subordinated, oppressed, or under-recognized people to restore dignity to themselves, their interests and/or their lived experiences is also consistent with Hebdige's offering that subcultures are 'mediated responses' to social circumstances and that the 'subcultural "instance" represents a "solution" to a specific set of circumstances, to particular contradictions' (Hebdige, 1979, p. 81). Further, as marginalized groups 'forge solutions' through the establishment of alternative conceptions of esteem, they place value upon that which is devalued by the larger society and thereby bestow dignity upon themselves in a way that is also a form of social and cultural resistance. Dignity for the dispossessed becomes in itself the 'tight common purpose' that Jean-Jacques Rousseau would tell us unites the ideal society (Rousseau, 1983; Taylor, 1992).

With the establishment of the new basis for community (as expressed through and in the form of the subcommunity), however, and in contradistinction to the collapse of difference we might infer from Rousseau, come developments Weber might describe as inherent to the nature of social relations. Specifically, we see the differentiation of status roles, the emergence and articulation of additional subcultures, the reintroduction of status quests and hierarchy, and the subordination of some to the glorification of others. By this hybrid theorization, then, the rise of the resistant subcommunity is ultimately ironic. While the subcommunity is the embodiment of a social revolution of sorts, thinkers ranging from Thomas Jefferson to Antonio Gramsci to George Orwell remind us not only that revolutions are rarely complete, but also that the seeds of tyranny are of the same strain as the seeds of revolution and social change (Jefferson, 1983 [1823]; 1998 [1794]; Gramsci, 1971; Orwell, 1996 [1946]). Since no revolution or revolutionary act can completely break from the social realm in which it was produced, its product will always reflect that context. In other words, we should not be surprised if we see that a resistant subcommunity displays many of the same structural traits we find so distasteful in larger social structures and society. A more cynical, but not unsupported, formulation would be that the primary difference between the larger social structure and its resistant subsets will be the details—that is, which traits will carry status-honor within the subcommunity and which traits will indicate subordination.

In short, even with the rise of a subcommunity whose existence is an attempt to foment change, only *form* will be affected, while *structures* of hierarchy remain intact. Members of the resistant subcommunity can take heart that by creating alternative standards for honor and status they are driving the constant (re)negotiation of society's values and creating space for the expansion of society's notions of humanity and worth. On the other hand, the existence of their subcommunity does little to

change the existing *structure of relations* that allowed dignity to be withheld from some to the exaltation of others in the first place.

Subcommunity Formation and the Emergence of Status Groups

As we look at the black student community on the campus of Midwestern University, indeed, what we see is the coalescence of a group of students around ideas of racial awareness and race pride, and around similar experiences and backgrounds. This coalescence reflects the anomie and estrangement of black students, the stigmatization of their physical traits and cultural styles, and the celebration of their shared lifeways and experiences. In other words, we see a group that accords dignity to the individual upon the basis of the very trait ('blackness' broadly imagined) that results in their stigmatization within the larger society.

With the establishment and development of the subcommunity, however, we also see the differentiation of members according to such overlapping but nonetheless recognizable roles as Christian, African, Athlete, or 'Greek' (i.e. member of a black Greek-letter fraternity or sorority). Social prestige is bestowed upon individuals according to such roles—a form of prestige that we can refer to as status-honor. Finally, competition exists among status groups for the relative predominance and hegemony of their position within the subcommunity's emergent social hierarchy.

Along with hierarchical distinctions among status groups, status groups are also notable for, but not defined by, both their relative prominence as well as their malleability. Some groups are recognizable to everyone who participates in the subcommunity and hence more influential, while other self-identified groups are not as widely considered outside small circles of influence and friends. Status groups vary in rigidity to the extent that while some are influenced by such local infrastructures as an athletic department (e.g. student athletes), and others by affiliations to national headquarters (e.g. fraternities and sororities), still others prove more malleable and responsive to shifting demographics within the school or to changes in the local socio-political climate. Moreover, since status groups are not discrete units, some students may participate in multiple groups and live up to different conceptions of status-honor depending upon the situation within which they find themselves at any given moment.

Finally, along with these status groups comes the creation of a pariah class within the black student community—a status group marked by self-imposed liminality. To be more specific, some black students should (by their phenotypic blackness and according to the logic of the black student community) consider themselves members of the black student community but nonetheless do not. These students do not view 'blackness' (or society's reaction to their blackness) as a basis for communion with other similarly marked individuals. From the perspective of the resistant community, their non-participation is read as an affront to the very (alternative) conception of dignity that members of the black student community uphold and promote. Different members of the black student community at Midwestern University speak of such students as 'black people who don't claim [their racial identity]' or, paradoxically, as 'black people who are white.' They further offer that black

students can never fully escape their racial identity, but that despite this, there will always be some who refuse to acknowledge their racial selves or the people whom they should consider their (fictive) brothers and sisters.

Alternative (External) Alliances and the Black Student Community

Both black students and a wide range of non-blacks associated with Midwestern University do not question the existence of an active black student community on campus. Students, administrators, staff, and faculty speak of the community in terms that acknowledge and assume its existence. Moreover, many black students and staff speak of the community as a subset of the larger black community as opposed to a subset of the larger university community. They do so despite the fact that most of their daily activities bring them in contact with other members of the university community to a greater extent than with black citizens of the city in which Midwestern is located. By aligning with the city's black community instead of with the university community, members of the black student community imagine their alliances and connections in ways that promote alternative knowledge bases, understandings and sources of support.

In the case of black students, persistent reference to their place within the city's black community also highlights their effort to maintain a sense of connection to people and institutions with whom and which they are no longer in regular contact. These include the black church, extended families, black businesses, and other (non-university-affiliated) blacks. Moreover, their sense of connection is maintained in the face of a campus structure that, in most formal respects, encourages their identification with the school as their primary source of community. Apparently, something about their experience(s)—something from their past or present—compels many black students to maintain, imagine, or otherwise build connections with a larger racial community that includes, but also exists beyond, the acreage of the university proper.

In some respects it is appropriate to speak of this connection between the black student community and the larger community as imagined, since physical contact with blacks beyond campus is irregular and most often must be planned. However, the connections are in many respects practical, responsive, embedded in collective memory, and regularly reinforced. Many black students look to family and friends from home for advice and to the local community for collective wisdom that they can tap into as a resource. At Midwestern, an example of this can be seen in the weekly exodus and return of black students who attend worship services in local, predominantly black Christian churches, including several Baptist churches, a Church of Christ, and some non-denominational churches. In these settings, members of the black student community experience fellowship with other blacks in non-academic, non-university contexts, and listen to 'Christian messages' in social/cultural settings similar to those which many experienced before coming to college.

For some black students, it is appropriate to speak of their sense of connection with the larger (imagined) black community as initially imagined and subsequently as continually forged (Anderson, 1983; Austin, 1995). Some students, having

attended schools in which they were the only persons of color and having lived in one of America's many almost exclusively white suburban enclaves, had no black friends and no more than passing contact with other black people (beyond their immediate family) before they came to college. Any connection they feel to the black community beyond campus is imagined to the extent that they do not have first-hand experience of commonalities that would bind them to other (non-student) blacks. As they befriend other black students whose ability to make the transition between campus and community is more fluid (community here referring to the imagined black community of the local city), their connections to other blacks become more concrete. They are broadened to the extent that they learn and act upon such time-honored formalities in the black community as frequenting black-owned businesses or attending community events in predominantly black sections of town.

Internal Alliances and the Black Student Community

Regardless of the nature of the connection between the black student community and the larger black community, the existence of both is unquestioned. At Midwestern, student groups such as SAAB (the Student African American Brotherhood) and AACC (the African American Cultural Committee) are organized around service to the black student community. Black fraternities and sororities are founded upon principles of providing leadership and support to black people generally. Professional organizations like NSBE (National Society of Black Engineers), NSBL (National Student Business League) and NABJ (National Association of Black Journalists) promote black students' professional development and academic achievement through careers fairs, workshops, local and national academic competitions, scholarships and other programs. Many of these organizations were founded in the early 1900s on either black or white campuses and represent an ongoing cultural, social and structural response to the position and circumstances of both black students on different campuses and of black people in the USA. Moreover, their continued presence attests to the reality of a complex and developed subcommunity with specific needs and internally generated responses (as opposed to a collection of students who happen to be black and for some incomprehensible reason choose to self-segregate). As Cohen offered in his comments about subcultures generally:

> Once established, such a subcultural system may persist, but not by sheer inertia. It may achieve a life which outlasts that of the individuals who participated in its creation, *but only so long as it continues to serve the needs of those who succeed its creators*. (Cohen, 1997 [1955], p. 51; emphasis added)

Cohen's comments resonate with those of the more conscious of Midwestern University's black students (with 'consciousness' understood as a concept used by black students to describe individuals' awareness of and dedication to addressing the needs, interests, and concerns of people of African descent). As one highly conscious

black graduate student who advises the black fraternities and sororities on campus stated:

> As long as there are black students here, there will be a [black student] community. It may change according to what is going on at the time, but as black people we will always have our own experiences and our own needs that draw us together.

Even the few black students who are part of the community but not active in any of the above groups still see themselves as members of a cohesive community and likewise do not question the community's existence. Rhoda, a self-described African (she was born in Ohio, but her parents are from Ghana and she claims dual citizenship) and self-identified member of the black student community, provides one example of this. She has her own group of friends within the community, and her group has its own standards for acting and reacting within the context of student life. Although these standards in some ways set them apart from other blacks, they nonetheless do not hesitate to consider themselves as part of the community and, likewise, their membership is unquestioned. Still, Rhoda, her friends, and other black students also assert that the position of black students within the community is fragile until they align themselves with a specific status group or in some other way(s) establish an acceptable and recognized identity within the community. For instance, a group of sophomore women explain that one reason they planned to pledge a black sorority was that although people 'knew them,' they felt like there was no place for them in the community. They actively sought a definitive identity through which other black students would recognize them.

Unlike those in search of an identity, others have little problem finding a place. For instance, Rhoda's identity and status role is that of African—yet she is a US citizen. This identity reflects her sentiments about who she is, as well as her physical appearance, since she is very dark-skinned and has other features that other blacks characterize as African. Through her role as African, Rhoda not only secures recognition, but also embodies behavioral traits that she on one hand learned from her parents, but that have also been reinforced once she either chose or felt compelled to live into a specific status role on campus. As it turns out, she and her friends fit into a role that has been tailor-made by similarly situated others who came before her, and that (as we shall see) complements her likelihood of realizing academic success.

Ascribed Role verse Internalized Conception of Role

The case of African students in the black student community provides an opportunity to introduce an area of dissonance that can accompany the delineation of status roles—specifically, that between *ascribed roles* within a subcommunity and the *internalized conceptions of roles*. From Rhoda's standpoint, her status position as African dictates that she is a serious student. Accordingly, she takes this to heart and offers that 'we [other Africans in the community] care more about our grades and study harder than they [other African Americans] do.' Rhoda assumes that she will

perform well academically and uses other black students (whom she assumes to be underperforming) as a frame of reference against which to construct her self-definition in this area. Moreover, her habits and performance reflect this assumption and this frame. She is a diligent student with high grades, and an active participant in (multiracial) study groups. From the standpoint of others in the black student community, however, an equally if not more important trait associated with her status role as an African is that she is likely be stand-offish towards other blacks.

In contrast to Rhoda's sense that African Americans are not diligent students, other African Americans consider academic achievement and a strong work ethic as central to their identity and role in the black student community. Hearkening back to historically rooted notions of 'race-men' and 'race-women' that were articulated by such African American educators as W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Nannie Helen Burroughs and Anna Julia Cooper, several students see academic success as an almost sacred responsibility to their black peers and those who came before them. For example, Renee, an honors business student who delivered the 2000 commencement address for the College of Business, was an exemplary student whose attitude was typical of race-conscious high achievers in the black community. According to Renee, 'it might sound conceited, but people on campus know me—black people and white administrators; I have to represent, because I am a role model.' Renee's sense of responsibility was also a source of motivation. It compelled her to look beyond herself and to see her efforts in terms of their potential impact upon the black student community as a whole. Other high achievers shared similar sentiments and beliefs and were, indeed, widely recognized among other black students as community leaders. In the case of such students, their ascribed role and internalized conception of role were in sync.

On the Gravitation of Individuals toward the Black Student Community

From the perspective of many black students, the black student community arises out of a basic need to experience a sense of belonging on campus and to develop friendship and support networks that address their everyday experiences. The desire to experience a sense of belonging reflects many students' desire, as they first step on campus, to find familiar ground, and to connect with others who share many of the same ritual styles, understandings and modes of behavior. When Donald, a senior and the current president of a Christian fraternity, thinks back to his freshman year experience, the story he tells is of the first day of school when he put on his backpack, left his dorm room and walked downstairs. After his first steps outside, he turned around, went back upstairs and prayed. The sea of white faces bustling back and forth to class had been overwhelming and in his words, 'it took the Lord God and everything I had to go back out there and make it through the first day.' Donald offers that he figured out early on that he needed two things to make it—firstly, God, and secondly, other black people. For Donald, conscious resistance was less important in coming into the black student community than the need to experience the comfort of being near people he considered as like himself. Even with Donald,

however, there are strains of resistance in his conversation. In one of our conversations, Donald was emphatic in stating that:

> We have to stick together or we won't make it. This place is tough on black people. Maybe everybody is not like me, but as far as I am concerned you need the community to survive.

Donald's comments lead naturally into the second impulse I identify as critical for black students entering into and forging community—the desire to build a network of support and friendship with others who share similar experiences, desires, needs, and fears. This occurs on formal and informal levels—with the student professional organizations previously mentioned, regular parties, and annual events. It even occurs in the space of friendship groups that take on an organizational character. Such groups often vie for status vis-à-vis the larger subcommunity, try to come to terms with what defines them as individuals and as a group, and are conscious in their desire to support one another in meaningful ways. Such friendship groups routinely develop among single-sex groups of black freshman who meet in the summer transition programs for incoming freshmen. In several cases these groups even give themselves a name, give each other nicknames, and hold regular meetings.

In arguing that two basic impulses—both located within the psyche of individuals—result in the creation and maintenance of the black student community, I draw attention to individual needs, circumstances, and experiences and tie the quest to satisfy these needs to community formation. In addressing the 'why' of the community, then, we learn that the black student community exists because it fulfills individual needs. This articulates nicely with the racial identity work of the psychologist, Tatum (1997), where she addresses racial congregation among black students, and of the legal theorist, Armour (1997), where he describes the circumstances by which people of African descent become raced as black. It also brings our attention to the oft-overlooked critical bridge that exists between individual experience and collective response.

In short, and consistent with the perspectives offered by Cohen (1997 [1955]), Castells (1997), Hebdige (1979) and others cited earlier, the black student community is a collective response to similar individual experiences. It is a product of a racialized group of students' similar needs; a response that helps black students survive and develop—if not academically in all cases, then at least emotionally and socially. True to our basic understanding of Durkheim, however, the sum is often greater than the whole of the parts. Thus, we should not be surprised to see unanticipated group behaviors and responses—both positive and negative—that go beyond the behavioral norms and conceptions of students when they operate as individuals.

Terms for Membership: (1) self-identification (2) adherence to norms

We understand how the black student community arises, why it exists and some of the contours of its operations. But what are the terms for membership? Who gets to be in the community and why? Several students describe the community as 'very

accepting' (that exact language was repeated in several encounters, discussions and interviews during my fieldwork) and there is a widely shared understanding that the community is a refuge of support to all who desire entry. In several specific instances, this rhetoric is put into practice—as in the case of non-black members of a predominantly black fraternity, and non-black members in the predominantly black gospel choir. Some white, Hispanic and Asian students who congregate with black students express that they 'feel more comfortable around blacks,' either because of the circumstances within which they grew up or because of interests that closely correspond to activities that are well developed within the black student community. Examples of the former include students who grew up in predominantly black neighborhoods or with one or more black parents. Examples of the latter include the gospel choir and weekly bible studies that attract Christians across racial boundaries. Other non-black students, however, feel intimidated and unwanted in predominantly black settings and believe that black students are isolationist. Furthermore, so as not to overstate the case, non-black community members, though present, are anomalous.

While race is a predominant variable for consideration, it is neither a defining variable nor an automatic marker for membership in the black student community. This is borne out by the examples of the few non-blacks who are active participants in the community, and by those blacks who are not. When asked if a black student who chose not to interact with other blacks would be a member of the black community, most black students answered 'no.' When further pressed as to what it would take for them to be members, most said that all the person has to do is 'want to belong' for them to be 'taken in.' The language of 'taking in' suggests that the community provides an umbrella of support; comments about having to 'want to belong' indicate that this support is mainly available for those who desire it.

Here we return to our first prerequisite for membership, a desire to be a member—or more specifically, an expressed desire to consider black students as constituting your primary community of affiliation. In some situations, a person may be born either into or out of a community and hence have little say in whether they are considered members. In contrast, the black student community ostracizes those who are phenotypically black but 'do not want to claim [a black racial identity],' while accepting individuals who are not phenotypically black but share key interests and commitments.

In addition to this desire to primarily associate with other black students as a prerequisite for inclusion in the community, an additional prerequisite is the willingness to abide by the norms and values of the community. To the extent that individuals duplicate norms that are widely valued in some acknowledged sector of the black student community, they are more likely to be welcomed. To the extent that individuals transgress—contradicting widely established norms or practicing taboo behavior—their full acceptance is questionable. Examples of the latter include openly gay students and students who date interracially.

The censure of those who engage in transgressive behaviors brings to mind anthropologist Signithia Fordham's statements about policing in the black community (Fordham, 1996). Such instances confirm that Fordham's observations on

the American high school level also have some bearing at college. At the same time, the examples and incidents on the college level are not so stark, nor in most cases are the sanctions against transgressors so severe, as those Fordham describes. Repercussions for inappropriate behaviors, interests, and lifestyles include a compromise in community standing among some status groups within the black student community, but perhaps the acquisition of status in others.

Of particular note, the most important area of community censure that Fordham describes is the devaluation of academics through a pejorative referral of the quest for academic achievement as 'acting white' and, by implication, not acting black. As she puts it:

> The construction of Otherness is an open secret at Capital High. It governs much of what is defined as success. Students who seek academic success risk being accused of acting white. (1996, p. 237)

This particular expression of policing communal norms so effectively described by Fordham—that is, the belittlement of academic drive by associating it with whiteness—is not as prevalent among black students at this site as she found among high school age adolescents.

This is not to say that acting white is not an important idea and phrase in the lexicon of black student community members at sites like Midwestern. But to the extent that this idea comes into play, it is more often associated with such behaviors as dressing with little consideration for appearance, going barefoot into dorm hall showers, drinking (alcohol) excessively, or practicing other behaviors many black students consider inappropriate, unsanitary or both. Sometimes, acting white is associated with verbal styles and demeanor—especially in instances where a person is unable or unwilling to switch their cultural styles to accommodate behavioral norms and linguistic styles more often associated with members of the black community.

In further contrast to Fordham's findings in a predominantly black high school, however, much of the open, mocking, policing behavior involves the ridicule of those judged by other black students as academic failures. The most remarkable case of this during my fieldwork observation involved an African American male who walked around campus with a book bag, spent time in the black students' Malcolm X lounge and attended parties, but was not, as it turned out, a student in good standing. He had been expelled for poor grades, but had tried to keep others from knowing this fact. One day, he 'cracked on' a black female in the Malcolm X lounge, which is to say he delivered an insult that was light-hearted, but still meant to cause embarrassment. She responded by 'calling him out,' publicly stating embarrassing details of his life, in this case, taunting that he wasn't even a student. Talking, card play, and the ever-present games of dominoes stopped as all attention turned to the verbal exchange. The collective shock of those present made it clear that, within the community, using someone's academic performance as the basis for an insult exists in the same mythical taboo realm as insulting a person's mother.

The reaction of the young man who had been taunted was unrestrained and furious. He lunged towards the young woman, and only the intervention of others

in the room prevented him from hitting her. While his actions revealed a clear inability to control his temper (to put it mildly), they also revealed deep pain and embarrassment over his academic failure and non-student status. From this exchange and others, it is apparent that within the black student community, academic failure is not a joking matter. Moreover, to the extent that it is joked about, we more likely see evidence of the self-esteem defense mechanism that psychologist Claude Steele (1999, 2003) talks about as opposed to true disregard for academics. As one black student put it in a discussion about students who fail out of the University's provisional admittance program:

> Some might sit around at dinner and clown and joke about it [their failing grades], but they just do that to cover up that they are about to be going home.

Role Switching

Even as students speak of such specific groups as 'Greeks,' Africans, or Athletes, most recognize that these groups are not discrete units. Rather, they function as Weberian ideal types (Gerth & Mills, 1958 [1946]), and several students operate according to the norms of different groups at different times. This phenomenon, whereby individuals switch among available status roles depending on setting and circumstance was, of course, noticed long ago. In his nineteenth-century article, 'The self and its selves,' American pragmatic philosopher William James offered an especially relevant formulation of this idea as it relates to our investigation of the student subcommunity:

> [A]s the individuals who carry images fall naturally into classes, we might practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinions he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. (James, 1999[1890], p. 159)

Several students switch among groups and alter their behavior accordingly as they do so. When they talk about how their behavior changes in different settings and with different groups, most see no contradiction in their actions. Rather, they speak of this 'flip-flopping' (as one student describes it) as a skill they develop. Some of the students with the highest grade point averages and most demanding course loads explain that 'everyone has to let loose every once in a while' and view such letting loose as indicative of a temporary role change. Black students in especially demanding disciplines often study with one group of students and socialize with another—reifying their sense that these activities belong in separate categories. Other students are very active within the black community for a period of time—attending annual events, group meetings and parties—but then (from the standpoint of the friends they socialize with) 'disappear' for weeks or semesters at a time. When I sought out and spoke with students whom others said had disappeared (they were usually busy, but easy to find), most offered that they were involved in a trade-off. While they

liked to attend social and cultural events, there were times when they 'had no time for that,' times when they 'had to focus.' In these cases, the peer groups for studying were often multiracial, if not mostly white.

Moreover, their words and rhetoric at times indicated that they did not feel comfortable studying with other blacks. One student, Tammy, who is now in the Midwestern School of Law, offered that she did not study with other black students because when they were together, they would talk and she would never get anything done. In conversations she shared that she distanced herself from the black student community in order to achieve the grades she desired, but was often lonely as a result. In a conversation just before Thanksgiving break in 1997, she acknowledged that she had not been with other black students in a while. At the same time, she still referred to black students as 'her friends' and to non-black peers in a distancing manner as 'the people I study with.'

Her one reprieve was a small black church, located in a residential section on the predominantly black section of the city, where she worshipped on Wednesdays and Sundays. She described other blacks as 'my people,' and expressed a need to be with them for friendship and support. Instead of spending time with the other black students, then, Tammy relied upon the local church to fulfill her need to experience communion with and support from people whom she considered natural kin.

While some black students participate in the black student community at some point but withdraw in others, others stay within the black student community as they alternate priorities, switching status groups as necessary. Within each group in which they participate, they assume the norms and behaviors associated therein and are granted status accordingly. As the settings switch, they alter their behaviors. In some cases, students initiate changes in setting, as when a student switches from 'study mode' to 'party mode' over the course of a given semester, or when they experience a need for a change of pace.

Another example of switching roles occurs with a male [American] football player I have watched in different settings. As with other students, his behavior changes markedly depending on whom he is with at the time. His ex-girlfriend was the first to point this out to me, and as I observed him I found her observations to be astute. As she noted:

> Whenever he is with his Christian friends [from the Christian Athletic organization Champions for Christ] he is one guy, but the rest of the time he acts out, cursing and such and carrying on. That is why I don't have time for that [expletive] any more.

Indeed, an observer of Dwayne could reasonably conclude that he is a consummate performer, most comfortable 'acting out,' but also able, when necessary, to show considerable social conservatism, to completely refrain from the cursing that often dominates his vocabulary, and to demonstrate impressive biblical knowledge. As a result of this cultural dexterity (and apparent comfort with contradictions), Dwayne enjoys high status among several socially conservative Christian athletes and with teammates who are openly hedonistic when it comes to how they relate to women.

Such students as Dwayne are not in complete control of what situations they find

themselves in and when. Those specifics are left up to larger structures, be they a class schedule, an athletic department or a football team. As an athlete, Dwayne's life is tightly scheduled and highly structured, and his behaviors are markedly different in front of coaches, with tutors, and with other Christian athletes. With coaches, he is said (by peers) to be generally respectful (although I have never witnessed these interactions myself). With tutors hired by the athletic department he is often uninterested in the subjects being studied, but most interested in the tutors doing as much of his work for him as possible. And with other Christian athletes he seems genuinely interested in projecting an image of propriety, morality, and discernment (standards that he rarely lives up to). Finally, in the presence of those he characterizes as 'his boys' (meaning his best friends), he is often disrespectful to his girlfriend and other women to the point of open misogyny. With his boys, his first love is American football and his second love is the home video game system known as PlayStation. Everything else comes after that. Even among non-athletes, certain activities are structured parts of students' daily lives—for instance, attending classes or eating in the cafeteria. In these arenas of recurrent and regular presence, black students must decide which set of behavioral norms they will most consistently adopt and, hence, through which they will be most widely known.

An arena where students' role switching becomes complicated is in large gatherings. Certain annual events bring as many as two-thirds of Midwestern's 1200-plus black undergraduate students together in one place at one time. According to one recent graduate, many of these events are as important for what happens 'on stage' as they are for 'seeing and being seen.' In fact, many important events blur the line between audience and participants. At the Delta's (black sorority) 'Ice-Breaker Step-Show,' where black Greek-letter organizations compete in a stylized rhythm and dance tradition known as stepping, audience reaction is often an important component in the judging. In addition, performances may include call and response with members of the audience, or surprise performers who come out of the audience to join performers on stage. The Sigma's (black fraternity) Amateur Night, which is a talent show and competition for students interested in singing, dancing, acting or other performances, often continues beyond the scheduled program as audience members come up on stage for impromptu performances. And like the step-show, judging for the competition is based largely on crowd response. Even the African American Cultural Committee's annual 'Tribute to the Black Man' Awards Banquet has a participatory feel as individual students come out of the audience to receive awards and are acknowledged by a room full of peers. In these and similar events in the life of the black student community, members often sense that everyone is performing in one way or another. As one student put it, 'we are a small community and everybody knows everybody. So if you come looking crazy [i.e. are poorly dressed], or if you come acting crazy, everyone will see it.'

Many students come to these events in recognized and recognizable groups—'Oh, there is the Box,' or 'here comes Lick-em.' The 'box of chocolates' is a group of 10 African American women who have maintained a close friendship with one another since they first met in 'Preview '94,' the 1994 class of a summer transition program for minority honors students. Likewise, Lick-em (ladies out for cash money) was a

group of young ladies who shared similar values and who were widely recognized by others in the community. I say 'was' because the latter group did not exist for long. Known for trying to 'get with' (establish romantic or sexual relationships) athletes and others with 'ends' (money/prestige), most of these women either left the university for academic or other reasons, or eventually changed their self-image. One member of Lick-em changed her status group affiliation and, subsequently, her identity within the community, and in her senior year served as president of the predominantly black Christian sorority on campus.

At any rate, black events—events sponsored and planned by, and for the most part for, black students—are ritual spaces through which individuals develop their identities, for themselves, and in the eyes of others. Though often jovial or appearing casual, these are charged spaces. The larger the gathering, the more powerful the moment can be—especially for younger black students who are still negotiating their place in the community. This is because when the majority of the community is present, individuals are visible to many different status groups at once and thus must decide what norms they will take on, and hence, with which group they will be most closely identified. Even given moments of heightened expectations and tension, however, identity and status are not settled in an instant, but are worked out over time—continually negotiated and renegotiated as students work to fit into available status roles, or even to reshape available roles to fit their needs and interests.

Ultimately, a number of factors not only inform, but overdetermine, the creation and ongoing existence of black student communities on predominantly white campuses. Today, their existence as subcommunities on predominantly white campuses across the USA is most often an assumed reality. But to simply assume the existence of a student subcommunity without an understanding of its contours or function(s) in individuals' lives is to lose important opportunities, not just to observe and account for social process, but also to positively affect individual educational outcomes. For programs or policies that are intended to improve academic performance to be effective, they must first take into account students' norms, values and behaviors. This process necessarily involves understanding and accounting for processes of subcommunity formation, status role negotiation, and other aspects of students' community and subcommunity participation. Programs that do so stand a better chance of being accepted by students and seamlessly integrated into their thinking and activities. In short, when it comes to addressing issues of student life, the contours of community are the appropriate starting point for discussion and analysis, with program and policy formulation as an organic outgrowth from that base.

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