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Book Reviews: Black Picket Fences, and Voices from Beneath the Veil

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Book Review: *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* by Mary Pattillo-McCoy and *Voices from Beneath the Veil: Analysis of the Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs of Middle Class African Americans* by Michael E. Hodge.

Review by Linda A. Treiber

What do sociologists know about the black American middle class? Scholarly studies of this group are sadly lacking. We have been forced to imagine the black middle class as somewhere between the socioeconomic extremes presented in scholarly literature and popular culture. As a result, we become alarmed and depressed after reading about the urban underclass and tensions between street and decent families, perhaps biasing our perceptions of black Americans as overwhelmingly poverty-stricken and deprived. While I don't wish to minimize their plight or suggest that highlighting their experiences has not been intellectually important, the evidence suggests that the portrayal has been skewed.

At the top of the class spectrum are the black elite, portrayed by Lawrence Otis Graham in *Our Kind of People: Inside America's Black Upper Class*. These are the folks who attend the right "cotillions, camps and private schools" as children (1999: 45), then go on to join select fraternities, sororities and social clubs in the historically black colleges that "count" (63). From an insider's perspective, Graham reveals a world of wealth, privilege and exclusivity in an entertaining gossipy style. As he explains, the Deltas, Links, and Boulé and other social organizations epitomize the black American upper crust in the cities of Chicago, Memphis, Atlanta, Detroit, and D.C. These are the groups who summer at Martha's Vineyard, Oak Bluffs and attend debutante balls. Not surprisingly, there is a degree of snobbery among these elite, but

it is tempered by a need to give back to the larger black community. Graham admits that wealth does not completely negate the effects of racism, but it does provide a certain level of defense.

Although there is much popular interest in upper and lower social class African Americans, we don't hear much about the black middle class. Why? Has it been overlooked by scholars who disregard it as bland and uninteresting? Perhaps, but I think the real issue is one of permeable boundaries and instability. The black middle class it is not hard to *find* but hard to *define*. Ostensibly more elusive than the white middle class, it is more difficult to isolate because of the ever shifting borders it shares with those on the other extremes. Enter these two books, both helping to fill the void.

In *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class*, Mary Pattillo-McCoy reports on three years of ethnographic research about "Groveland", a black middle-class suburb in the Chicago metro area. Its first generation residents were originally from the south, but migrated to work in factories and civil services. Consequently, they were able to buy nice homes in segregated neighborhoods. Nonetheless, as described by Pattillo-McCoy, the second generation experienced difficulty achieving their parents' middle class standard of living due to a combination of changing economic opportunities and varied levels of individual agency. Some moved back in with their parents. Others bought homes of their own in the neighborhood, while still others live in properties bequeathed to them, although they are unwilling or unable to adequately maintain the property. Interestingly, those who moved up and on were not accorded much attention in the book.

At its core, *Black Picket Fences* is a story about the peril of middle class blacks and how fragile their status can be. The lower classes and their negative behaviors are both physically and

ideologically close to Groveland, making middle class status very precarious. The black mobsters selling drugs in the neighborhood are mostly tolerated and not feared, in part because of years of familiar association. According to Pattillo-McCoy, a blind eye is turned when the older generation remembers these criminals as essentially “good kids”.

Expanding on the dual categories “street” versus “decent” families (Anderson 1999), Pattillo-McCoy includes three categories of people defined by their relation to street life: i.e., “consumed”, “thrilled” and “marginal”. She explains that even middle class black Americans can be in “a Ghetto trance”, where they are excited to know people who are part of the street scene and thus enjoy telling stories about it (119-124). Whites are similarly thrilled by the portrayal of tough “gangsta” life, but the fascination for black Americans carries more risk. Because black Americans can be readily misidentified as being part of gangs by authorities, the innocent copying of clothing styles, handshakes, and slang can lead police and bona fide gang members to think they are a threat.

In chapter 7 “Nike’s Reign”, Pattillo-McCoy cites studies showing that African Americans are more susceptible to advertising messages for luxury and portable goods such as clothing and cars and therefore are more likely than whites of the same income level to spend over their means (146). Not surprisingly, she finds evidence of how debt also contributes to the fragility of the black middle class in Groveland.

A major strength of the book is how carefully and methodically Pattillo-McCoy details the lives of those in the neighborhood. Her conclusions are placed squarely in context. *Black Picket Fences* gives us a picture of a suburban neighborhood in transition, where the “middle class” includes drug dealers who live at home with their parents. However, this raises several

unresolved questions. First, although social class is clearly a social construction, one wonders if her classifications are accurate. It begs for a comparison between black middle class groups in other US cities or suburbs and between other racial and ethnic middle class groups. For example, is a white Mafioso character like the fictional Tony Soprano “middle class”? Certainly, he held the trappings of wealth, but class comes from values and norms as well as money. What then of the black mobsters described in this book? Are they middle class, as Pattillo-McCoy claims, or is this asking that one suspend disbelief? One wonders if the black middle class is so hard to find that we have to include such entrepreneurs.

The middle class residents of Groveland described by Pattillo-McCoy are much closer to the streets than to the top to the socioeconomic hierarchy. The wealthy and exclusionary black elite detailed in Graham’s *Our Kind of People* seem worlds away from Pattillo-McCoy’s middle class. And so they are, which is her main point. On the other hand, the working class and lower class are nipping at their heels.

Michael Hodge takes a different approach in studying the black middle class. In *Voices from Beneath the Veil*, Hodge uses personal interviews from a wide range of middle class African Americans rather than an ethnographic approach. He focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of assimilation and gives voice to its oppositional forces. Hodge asks how middle class African Americans view their class position and level of acculturation in the United States (2009: 36).

In chapter 4, “Marginality in America”, Hodge utilizes classic sociological theories to examine experiences of middle class African Americans. Yet, he takes issue with major perspectives offered as proof of a post-racial society. He critiques classic assimilationist and

marginality frameworks, noting that Anglo conformity is not the norm for all. To better explain the black middle class experience, Hodge proposes an Afrocentric model of assimilation.

Voices from Beneath the Veil can be situated within the broader tradition of race and class literature. The book joins predecessors of this ilk in describing the ways that being black and middle class is both perilous and satisfying. Hodge, however, does and does not accomplish this task. To begin with, he draws heavily on classic works in his review of the literature. Some, like Park and Stonequist, date from the 1930's. Indeed, most of the theoretical works cited are at least 30 years old. On the plus side, this displays an excellent working knowledge of Dubois, Frazier, and Cox, thereby making this an ideal text in a social theory course. To its credit, the text provides a thorough discussion of Milton Gordon's 1964 theory of assimilation. Yet, one would expect in a book about middle class African Americans to include works of relatively recent authors as well, but it does not.

Several unresolved questions arose while reading this book. First, is the question of assimilation and Anglo conformity. It seems to me that Hodge has set up assimilationist theory as a straw figure, one easily knocked about. The road to assimilation in the US has never been easy for non-whites. We all know this. Hodge sets assimilation up as a weak link from which to make his point, yet it's one already made by many others. Then he offers a model of black America that has not conformed or assimilated, but instead remained oppositional. He likewise portrays a white America that has not amalgamated or changed since the theories he critiques. But herein is the confusion. It was not always clear which parts of Anglo-America are opposed by black Americans. In other words, if Anglo-conformity means that groups coming to the US are expected and encouraged to shed their culture and adopt "white Anglo-American value and belief systems" (2009:30), then a clear definition is needed as a starting point. A more current

deconstruction of the central concept and then an explanation of how black Americans fit or do not (have embraced/don't embrace, etc.) would have been helpful.

Middle class white and black Americans, while different in many ways, have wide areas of overlap. So-called black culture and white culture have merged in some ways and increasingly separated in others. While Hodge thoroughly discusses how the language, wealth, and politics of black Americans differ from those of whites, I often found myself asking, "What *is* the white value system?" This dichotomy also assumes artificial value homogeneity among black Americans as well.

What I liked best about the book were the voices of middle class African Americans as they describe their efforts to navigate contradictory class positions. Their observations breathed life into the manuscript giving it volume and sound. This was especially evident in chapter 6, "Cultural Opposition" where strong quotes highlight the respondents' reactions to racism. Throughout the volume, Hodge's interviews aptly illustrate his theoretical stance. Likewise, his use of Burawoy's extended case method seems appropriate for the topic at hand, although more detail would enhance this section.

In summary, both Pattillo-McCoy and Hodge contribute to our understanding of the black middle class albeit in different, yet important ways. Both document the continuing problems of being black in a largely white society. Pattillo-McCoy focuses on space and place, aptly demonstrating the fragile position of the black middle class. Hodge sheds new light onto the shared American narrative of assimilation, conformity, and resistance for the African American middle class. Both add to our knowledge of this important group.

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