

# “The White Space”

Sociology of Race and Ethnicity  
2015, Vol. 1(1) 10–21  
© American Sociological Association 2014  
DOI: 10.1177/2332649214561306  
sre.sagepub.com



Elijah Anderson<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Since the end of the Civil Rights Movement, large numbers of black people have made their way into settings previously occupied only by whites, though their reception has been mixed. Overwhelmingly white neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, restaurants, and other public spaces remain. Blacks perceive such settings as “the white space,” which they often consider to be informally “off limits” for people like them. Meanwhile, despite the growth of an enormous black middle class, many whites assume that the natural black space is that destitute and fearsome locality so commonly featured in the public media, including popular books, music and videos, and the TV news—the iconic ghetto. White people typically avoid black space, but black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence.

## Keywords

color line, discrimination, prejudice, racism, racial profiling, segregation

Over the past half century, American society has undergone a major racial incorporation process, during which large numbers of black people have made their way from urban ghettos into many settings previously occupied only by whites. Toward the end of the Civil Rights Movement, massive riots occurred in cities across the country, as blacks grew increasingly insistent and militant (see Wicker 1968). It was in this context that the federal government passed far-reaching legislation that made black people full citizens while targeting for reform racially segregated workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, and universities. These reforms, coupled with a prolonged period of economic expansion, set the stage for the historic period of racial integration and incorporation, including the subsequent growth of the black middle class, which is now the largest in American history. White society’s reception of upwardly and outwardly mobile black people, however, was decidedly mixed. To be sure, many whites encouraged and supported racial equality and progress, but many others, consumed by deeply held prejudices, powerfully resisted these changes, which they feared abrogated their own rights and assumed privileges.

The Civil Rights Movement is long past, yet segregation persists. The wider society is still replete with overwhelmingly white neighborhoods, restaurants, schools, universities, workplaces,

churches and other associations, courthouses, and cemeteries, a situation that reinforces a normative sensibility in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present. In turn, blacks often refer to such settings colloquially as “the white space”—a perceptual category—and they typically approach that space with care.

When present in the white space, blacks reflexively note the proportion of whites to blacks, or may look around for other blacks with whom to commune if not bond, and then may adjust their comfort level accordingly; when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally “off limits.” For whites, however, the same settings are generally regarded as unremarkable, or as normal, taken-for-granted reflections of civil society.

The city’s public spaces, workplaces, and neighborhoods may now be conceptualized essentially as a mosaic of white spaces, black spaces, and

---

<sup>1</sup>Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Elijah Anderson, Yale University, P.O. Box 208265, New Haven, CT 06520, USA.  
Email: elijah.anderson@yale.edu

cosmopolitan spaces (racially diverse islands of civility) that may be in various stages of flux, from white to black or from black to white (Anderson 2011). As demographics change, public spaces are subject to change as well, impacting not only how a space is occupied and by whom but also the way in which it is perceived.

What whites see as “diverse,” blacks may perceive as homogeneously white and relatively privileged (see Jackson 1999). While the respective white and black spaces may appear to be racially homogeneous, typically they can be subclassified in terms of ethnicity and social class. “White spaces,” for instance, often include not only traditional Americans of European descent but also recently arrived European immigrants and visitors as well as others who may be perceived as phenotypically “white.” Similarly, those inhabiting “black space” are not always simply traditional African Americans but may be subclassified as African, Latino, Haitian, Caribbean, Cape Verdean, and so on. Accordingly, the racially mixed urban space, a version of which I have referred to elsewhere as “the cosmopolitan canopy,” exists as a diverse island of civility located in a virtual sea of racial segregation. While white people usually avoid black space, black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence.

## BLACK SPACE

At the nadir of race relations around the turn of the twentieth century, black people occupied a lowly, non-negotiable, caste-like place, particularly in the South (see Anderson et al. 2012; Davis and Gardner 2009; Dollard 1957). This “place” was established during slavery and shaped by a history of state-sanctioned racial segregation. As blacks arrived and settled in cities, they were typically contained in ghettos, a process vividly described in works by W.E.B. Du Bois (1899); Robert E. Park, Ernest Burgess, and Rod McKenzie (1925); St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1945); E. F. Frazier (1962); Kenneth B. Clark (1965); William J. Wilson (1978, 1987); Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1998); and me (Anderson 1978, 1990, 1999). These segregated communities were reinforced and solidified by working-class men and women who labored in hospitals, factories, wealthy and middle-class white households, and local small businesses. The institutions they built, particularly the black church, inspired a rich black cultural tradition (see Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Today, despite the progressive changes wrought by the

racial incorporation process that occurred from the 1960s through the 1980s and beyond, the color line persists, now manifested by the iconic ghetto (Anderson 2012), as blacks experience on occasion moments of acute disrespect that may result in racial setbacks at work, at play, and in everyday life, but often most dramatically, for young men in particular, at the hands of aggressive police, inclined to “keep blacks in their place” (see Anderson 2014; Pierce 1970).

Spawned by this racial incorporation process, the black middle class has grown substantially, and many of its members have moved away from the black ghetto to the suburbs, where they often experience re-segregation, as the whites they join flee the very neighborhoods they have entered or may shun them in public. Many of these blacks now reside in solidly middle-class residential areas that are mostly black but once were not open to them (see Alba, Logan, and Stults 2000). Others live in “nice” homes and apartments in some of the city’s most exclusive neighborhoods, and their children attend formerly white schools (see Logan and Zhang 2010). Black people work in a wider range of occupations than ever—not simply in menial jobs but in professional positions in which they have rarely appeared before, including as doctors, lawyers, professors, corporate executives, and major elected officials, and many of them are highly successful (see Lacy 2007; Landry 1988; Pattillo 2013; Robinson 2010; Wilson 1978).

In their leisure time, these blacks may join white or other friends for tennis or golf; some attend predominantly white churches and belong to country clubs, where they and their families may be among the few black members. They send their children to private schools and encourage them to excel in the classical study of language, literature, and music while gently warning them to not forget where they came from, urging them to hold on to their blackness. However, their children sometimes become intimately involved in diverse play and social groups that totally belie their parents’ experiences with the nation’s racially segregated past, of which the younger people are sometimes fundamentally unaware and to which many are unable to relate.

As this new black middle class becomes more well established, its members become increasingly more accomplished. But in terms of phenotype and skin color, most are virtually indistinguishable from the blacks who reside in the local ghetto, and they are profiled on occasion for this reason. Some of these women and men drive expensive Range Rover SUVs or Mercedes Benz and Lexus sedans,

but when driving in the white space, they attract special scrutiny; on occasion, they get stopped and questioned by the police, who then may “discover” charges on which to detain them.

On occasion, these black people dine at some of the city’s finest restaurants, and they shop, at times haltingly, at high-end stores like Brooks Brothers, Chanel, and Neiman Marcus. Members of this class occasionally mix business with pleasure, as they may casually do business deals with one another and with their white counterparts in settings that are so expensive they are exclusive. Highly status conscious, these blacks are very much aware of the figures they strike at work, at play, and at home, in predominantly white or in racially mixed settings (Lacy 2007; Patillo 2013; Robinson 2010). In these settings, often but not always, they appear distinctive and well dressed, wearing expensive designer clothes. But at times, particularly when appearing casually dressed, they can be challenged in restaurants, in their cars, in their buildings, on the golf course, in a fancy hotel lobby, or even arrested for “breaking into” their own homes (see Ogletree 2010).

Although increasingly present in the consciousness of the larger society, members of the black middle class can be rendered almost invisible by the iconic ghetto. Police officers, taxi drivers, small business owners, and other members of the general public often treat blackness in a person as a “master status” that supersedes their identities as ordinary law-abiding citizens. Depending on the immediate situation, this treatment may be temporary or persistent while powerfully indicating the inherent ambiguity in the anonymous black person’s public status (see Anderson 1990; Becker 1973; Hughes 1944). In popular parlance, whether hailing from the ghetto or the middle-class suburbs, most critically, they exist “while black.” And for many, their black skin designates them as being “from the ghetto.” While operating in the white space, they can be subject to social, if not physical, jeopardy. Thus, while navigating the white space, they risk a special penalty—their putative transgression is to conduct themselves in ordinary ways in public while being black at the same time.

Members of this group are typically only a generation or so removed from the ghetto, and many have impoverished relatives who still reside there. While their lives are in marked contrast to those of their ghetto-dwelling counterparts and kinfolk, when enacting professional roles they do so with limited credibility, their status almost always provisional, and subject to negotiation (see E. Goffman

1963; Jaynes 2004; Anderson 2011). For as a relatively privileged class of people, generally, they walk through the world in obscurity, operating on the margins between the ghetto and the wider white society.

Meanwhile, the physical black ghetto persists, though it also appears to verge on self-destruction. As the American economy has changed from manufacturing to service and high technology and has become increasingly globalized, inner-city black communities suffer greatly from historic dislocation. Jobs that formerly sustained these communities have been sent away, to the suburbs or offshore, or have become more complicated, or have become too “soft-skilled” for the “rough people” of the black ghetto, and when seeking new workers, employers scrutinize them and often discriminate against them in favor of whites, including new immigrants who sometimes have more in the way of human capital or simply promise to be cheaper or more docile as part of a workforce (see Kirshenman and Neckerman 1991). Moreover, welfare rolls and the various social programs that once helped the poor and dislocated have been slashed, leaving them and their families in dire financial situations.

In this context, the irregular economy has emerged and become elaborated. To get by or just to make ends meet, local people barter, borrow, and beg from one another, and sometimes from their better-off relatives who are now more often a part of the larger middle class. Still others develop informal, public enterprises that traffic in products from soft drinks and “loose” cigarettes to used books and magazines (see Duneier 2000). The truly desperate may engage in all manner of illegal activity to obtain money, from drug dealing to street crime. In particular, for many of the young boys, the drug trade promises quick money and status where the regular economy offers little; though selling drugs may attract them, only those at the top make the real money, while the others fight over turf and territory (see Anderson 1990, 1999; A. Goffman 2014; Venkatesh 2009).

In the local community, guns and drugs proliferate, and residents suffer the collateral damage of gun violence and the mayhem that follows. The civic authorities, represented by the local police, apparently abdicate their responsibilities, as high rates of homicide and violence are tolerated and publicized. Many of the local people in such communities become resigned to being on their own and cope any way they can. They commonly take matters of personal security into their own hands. In this context, respect for the civil law erodes and street justice

emerges, manifested in a “code of the street,” in which “street credibility” becomes an extremely valuable coin that promises security while in fact it exacerbates violence and homicide rates on the inner-city streets, which increasingly resemble a war zone (see Anderson 1999; A. Goffman 2014).

Meanwhile, a significant but undetermined number of people in the larger society, particularly those who occupy the white space, typically look on with disgust, pity, judgment, and fear. Their visions and assessments often ignore the impact of structural poverty and racism on the inner-city ghetto, and many become inclined to blame the residents themselves for “living that way.” In these circumstances, the ghetto poor become all the more a pariah people, believed to be more likely to victimize others than to be victimized themselves (see Wacquant 2007).

For the larger society, from the nightly news and media reports of rampant black-on-black crime and at times from close observation of black people in public, images of the black ghetto loom large. 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 universally low opinion of blacks as a racial category (see Feagin 2006; Massey and Denton 1998). 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 a rationalization for discrimination against black people in general.

## THE WHITE SPACE

For black people in particular, white spaces vary in kind, but their most visible and distinctive feature is their overwhelming presence of white people and their absence of black people. When the anonymous black person enters the white space, others there immediately try to make sense of him or her—to figure out “who that is,” or to gain a sense of the nature of the person’s business and whether they need to be concerned. 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 (see Anderson 2011, 2012).

In other words, whites and others often stigmatize anonymous black persons by associating them with the putative danger, crime, and poverty of the iconic ghetto, typically leaving blacks with much to prove before being able to establish trusting relations with them. Accordingly, the most easily tolerated black person in the white space is often one who is “in his place”—that is, one who is working as a janitor or a service person or one who has been vouched for by white people in good standing. Such a person may be believed to be less likely to disturb the implicit racial order—whites as dominant and blacks as subordinate.

Strikingly, a black person’s deficit of credibility may be minimized or tentatively overcome by a performance, a negotiation, or what some blacks derisively refer to as a “dance,” through which individual blacks are required to show that the ghetto stereotypes do not apply to them; in effect, they perform to be accepted. 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.

Depending on how well the black person performs or negotiates, he or she may “pass inspection,” gaining provisional acceptance from the immediate audience. But others there may require additional proof on demand. In public white spaces, like upscale shops or restaurants, many blacks take this sort of racial profiling in stride; they expect it, treat it as a fact of life, and try to go on about their business, hoping to move through the world uneventfully. And most often, with the help of social gloss to ease their passage, they do (E. Goffman 1959); however, on occasion they experience blatant discrimination, which may leave them deflated and offended. White salesmen, security guards, and bouncers repeatedly approach black persons with a disingenuous question, “Can I help you?” The tone of voice and the circumstances belie a true offer of help and define the situation as slightly ominous. A young black male hears the question as “What is your business here?” Most defenders of such spaces prefer to be more indirect in their challenges and queries to avoid offending the black person or incurring lawsuits.

When the anonymous black person can demonstrate that he or she has business in the white space, by producing an ID card, or simply passing an initial inspection, the defending “agents” may relax

their guard, at least for the time being. They may then advance from concern with the person's deficit of credibility to his or her provisional status, suggesting a conditional "pass." But as the iconic ghetto hovers overhead, this social plateau simply foreshadows further evaluations that typically have little to do with the black person's essential merit as a person. When venturing into or navigating the white space, black people endure such challenges repeatedly.

In white neighborhoods, blacks may anticipate such profiling or hassling by the neighborhood watch group, whose mission is to monitor the "suspicious-looking." Any black male can qualify for close scrutiny, especially under the cover of darkness. Defensive whites in these circumstances may be less consciously hateful than concerned and fearful of "dangerous and violent" black people. And in the minds of many of their detractors, to scrutinize and stop black people is to prevent crime and protect the neighborhood. Thus, for the black person, particularly young males, virtually every public encounter results in a degree of scrutiny that a "normal," white person would certainly not need to endure.

A more subtle but critical version of this kind of profiling occurs in the typical workplace. From the janitor to a middle-level manager, black persons, until they have established themselves, live under the tyranny of the command performance. Around the office building, the black worker, particularly when the worker is a male, comes to be known publicly as "the black guy in my building," and if there are a few such "black guys" working there who "roam" the premises, white workers at times confuse one with another, occasionally misidentifying the person by name. Given such racial ambiguity, the string of white people standing in line to witness the black person's performance, or "dance," may encourage those who were once approving or convinced to demand an encore. Thus, as long as the black person is present in the white space, he or she is likely to be "on," performing before a highly judgmental but socially distant audience.

However, that black persons can now negotiate their status in the white space through such performances indicates how much American society has changed since slavery and the caste-like system of state-enforced racial segregation. With the advent of the racial incorporation process, not only has the middle class grown substantially, but black people now operate at virtually all levels of society, and they enact various roles of which their forefathers could have only dreamed. Because this middle class has been established and continues to

proliferate, a black person is now more believable occupying a social position far beyond the caste-like place and positions blacks have traditionally inhabited, and in which their white counterparts have so successfully worked to keep them.

While racism continues to manifest in occasional overtly hateful or violent acts, racism is more commonly manifested in a pervasive attitude that all black people start from the inner-city ghetto, and before experiencing decent treatment or trusting relations with others, they must demonstrate that the ghetto stereotype does not apply to them. Despite positive social change and the growth of the black middle class, it is still the case that when encountering blacks in the white space, some whites experience cognitive dissonance and, if for no other reason than the need to set the dissonant picture straight, become confused or disturbed, or even outraged at what they see (see Sears and Henry 2003). In the interest of consonance, they try to put the black person "back in his place"—at times telling him in no uncertain terms to "go back where you came from."

Several years ago, I vacationed in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, a pleasant Cape Cod town full of upper-middle-class white vacationers, tourists, and working-class white residents. During the two weeks that my family and I spent there, I encountered very few other black people. We had rented a beautiful cottage about a mile from the town center, which consisted of a library and a few restaurants and stores catering to tourists. Early one weekday morning, I jogged down the road from our cottage through the town center and made my way to Route 6, which runs the length of the Cape from the Sagamore Bridge to Provincetown. It was a beautiful morning, about 75 degrees, with low humidity and clear blue skies. I had jogged here many times before. At 6 a.m., the road was deserted, with only an occasional passing car. I was enjoying my run that morning, listening to the nature sounds and feeling a sense of serenity. It seemed I had this world all to myself. Suddenly a red pickup truck appeared and stopped dead in the middle of the road. I looked over at the driver, a middle-aged white man, who was obviously trying to communicate something to me. He was waving his hands and gesticulating, and I immediately thought he might be in distress or in need of help, but I could not make out what he was saying. I stopped, cupped my hand to my ear to hear him better, and yelled back, "What did you say?" It was then that he made himself very clear. "Go home! Go home!" he yelled, dragging out the words to make sure I

understood. I felt provoked, but I waved him off and continued on my way (see Anderson 2012).

In the white space, the anonymous black person's status is uncertain, and he or she can be subject to the most pejorative regard. For their part, in the interest of civility, most whites who harbor them know to keep such negative thoughts to themselves. When a racial epithet, or the attitude underlying it, is expressed, it tells the black person directly that he or she does not belong. As one black informant observed,

“Once it happens to you, all bets are off, and you do not know what to expect, no matter what you thought of yourself; for the moment, you don't know just where you stand. You feel like a stranger in a strange land.”

Almost any white person present in the white space can possess and wield this enormous power. And those who feel especially exercised and threatened by the rise of blacks may feel most compelled to wield that power (see Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999; Feagin 2006). For many of them, blacks in the white space may be viewed as a spectacle of black advancement at the expense of whites. Black presence thus becomes a profound and threatening racial symbol that for many whites can personify their own travail, their own insecurity, and their own sense of inequality. While certainly not all are guilty of such acts, many can be mobilized in complicity to “protect” the white space, which blacks must navigate as a condition of their existence, and where whites belong and black people can so easily be reminded that they do not.

## MORAL AUTHORITY

The negative images others take from the iconic ghetto conspire to negate or undermine the moral authority of the black person in the larger society, and this is at no time more consequential than when he or she navigates the white space. When present there, the black person typically has limited standing relative to his white counterparts and is made aware of this situation by the way others treat him. With a wealth of moral authority, one can experience acceptance, as well as an aura of protection against ritual offenses, including random acts of disrespect; without such authority, the black person is uniquely vulnerable. When respected, a black person exerts a degree of moral sway that constrains, or checks, those inclined to show him disrespect, to offend him, or to mistreat him or her, for

the possession of moral authority by the putative victim places the offender on morally dubious ground. This can cause the person so inclined to pause, possibly constrained by what his offenses might mean for what others would think of him, or what he might think of himself if he follows his inclination. With his own esteem or self-concept in the balance, he might anticipate shame for himself. But for the black person, moral authority is actualized only when he is well integrated into the white space, and most often he is not.

When black persons lack moral authority, those who are inclined to offend them on the basis of their color may know no shame and face few sanctions. Thus, without such authority, the black person moves through the larger society in a vulnerable state, which is particularly so when navigating the white space—a world in which he typically has limited social standing, and thus limited respect. Indeed, it is in such settings that the black person meets on occasion acute, racially based disrespect—or, as many black people call it, the “nigger moment” (see Anderson 2011). In navigating the white space, many blacks regard such aggressions as inevitable and have learned to think of them as small and large (see Pierce 1970). Usually, they ignore the small incidents, considering them not worthy of the mental work and trouble that confronting them would require. But the large ones cannot be ignored, for typically they are highly disturbing, volatile, occasionally even violent, and capable of fundamentally changing one's outlook on life—not to mention the glossy exterior many blacks display while negotiating the white space as part of their daily lives; when such a moment occurs, the person can feel that he or she has been “put in his or her place.”

In the general scheme of the white space, it matters little whether such acute disrespect is intended or unintended. The injury most often has the same effect: deflation and a sense of marginalization, regardless of the black person's previous negotiations, putative achievements, or claims to status; the person is reminded of her provisional status, that she has much to prove in order to really belong in the white space.

The black person's realization of her predicament may be gradual, as awareness often occurs in subtle and ambiguous ways over time, through what may seem to be the deceptively ordinary interactions and negotiations of everyday life. In the white space, small issues can become fraught with racial meaning or small behaviors can subtly teach or remind the black person of her outsider

status, showing onlookers and bystanders alike that she does not really belong, that she is not to be regarded and treated as a full person in the white space. In time, she may conclude that the real problem she faces in this setting is that she is not white and that being white is a fundamental requirement for acceptance and a sense of belonging in the white space.

When blacks come to the realization that common courtesies will not be extended to them, that their white counterparts easily command them and they do not, their faith in the putative fairness of the wider system erodes, and they can become cynical. Such realizations do not occur overnight but are often gradual and may require many months or years of experience and observation before the black person concludes that the “game is rigged” against him, chiefly because of the color of his skin. With an accumulation of race-based micro- and macro-aggressions, the person can hit a wall from which there is seldom a full recovery (Pierce 1970). When this point is reached, playing along, smiling, or laughing in the white space becomes more difficult. Gradually and effectively, he reaches an irreversible revelation that permanently impacts his consciousness.

With these understandings, many blacks approach the white space ambivalently, and ostensibly for instrumental reasons. When possible, they may avoid it altogether or leave it as soon as possible. In exiting the white space, however, a black person can feel both relief and regret—relief for getting out of a stressful environment and regret for perhaps leaving prematurely. For the white space is where many social rewards originate, including an elegant night on the town, or cultural capital itself—education, employment, privilege, prestige, money, and the promise of acceptance. To obtain these rewards, blacks must venture into the white space and explore its possibilities, engaging it to the extent that they can while hoping to benefit as much as possible. To be at all successful, they must manage themselves within this space. But the promise of acceptance is too often only that, a promise. All too frequently, prejudiced actors pervade the white space and are singly or collectively able and interested in marginalizing the black person, actively reminding him of his outsider status to put him in his place. Ralph’s experience is germane.

## RALPH’S SOCCER GAME

“Ralph,” a black 18-year-old, grew up in a nearly all-white, upper-middle-class neighborhood and has attended private schools in a wealthy section of Philadelphia for his entire life. His parents are well

off and pay Ralph’s full tuition themselves. A student of “good character” who makes excellent grades, Ralph is one of the few black students in his school. He is also a member of the soccer team.

When his team plays other elite high schools in the Philadelphia suburbs, he is usually the only black player on the field, and he plays the game well. During these games, Ralph is occasionally called “nigger,” but such outbursts usually come from spectators. Recently, when he was playing in an “away” game, the epithet came from an opposing player. As the clock wound down and his team seemed destined to win, tensions between the opposing teams spiraled into verbal conflict. After one of Ralph’s teammates was apparently fouled up the field and Ralph called this to the attention of the referee, one of the opposing players retorted, “What are you going to do about it, nigger?” He yelled his remarks directly at Ralph quite loudly and within earshot of the coaches, the referee, and the spectators—including Ralph’s mother, the only black person in the stands. When Ralph heard this epithet directed at him, he did not know how to react.

“Everyone focused on me, and I never felt so alone in my life—my head was just about to explode, and I just pushed the guy,” Ralph told me later. As the referee approached, Ralph said to him, “Did you hear that? He just called me a nigger!” The referee just shrugged. Then the opposing player yelled at Ralph, “So what? Yeah, I said it, and I’ll say it again!” The referee and the coaches, all of whom witnessed this exchange, appeared to ignore the white player’s comments and Ralph’s response.

The spectators, largely the players’ parents, teachers, and classmates, looked on impassively, though a few hissed and booed at Ralph. Ralph felt uneasy and very alone, not knowing where he stood with his teammates. His mother felt deeply disturbed and humiliated, but mostly she felt sad for her son. After the game, when the tension had died down, the opposing player singled out Ralph’s mother and told her, “Your son was in the wrong, you know. He never should have been so close to me.” Ralph told me he was glad he did not see the opposing player approach his mom.

At the end of the game, the coaches suspended the post-game ritual meeting and handshake between the opposing sides. With the confusion, not everyone understood exactly what had happened during the game; they only knew there had been unusual tension and that Ralph had been involved. But even though they failed to know what the trouble was, the attendees all seemed to blame Ralph for the incident, he said. Later, an acquaintance of Ralph’s mother said she had

gathered that Ralph had been involved with some sort of trouble, and she now suggested that Ralph not ride back on the team bus but be driven by his mother. His mother refused.

Hence, the black presence in the white space is tenuous at best. For there are always people who are ready and able to discourage the black person or to discredit him or her through association with the iconic ghetto, at times for their own self-esteem or advancement. This category includes whites and others, but also—and ironically—some black people themselves have become concerned to place social distance between themselves and those associated with the iconic ghetto. In this fundamental respect, the ghetto icon becomes an acceptable hook for racism without racists (Bonilla-Silva 2013). A particular organization—for instance, a corporation, a nonprofit, or a public sector bureaucracy—may pride itself on being egalitarian and universalistic and not recognize its own shortcomings with respect to racial inequality. The generalized effect of the iconic ghetto is often subtle; the issue of race can remain unspoken, but in the white space it can count for everything.

## SHAWN'S ORDEAL

A law student in Washington, DC, “Shawn” grew up in inner-city Philadelphia but was able to attend private schools, where he did very well, and went on to college and to a prestigious law school. He and the handful of other black law students were the only nonwhite residents of the affluent neighborhood near the law school.

One evening after classes, Shawn was waiting for a bus to go home. His apartment was only a 10-minute walk away, but he had stopped by the local grocery store and had groceries and books to carry, so he decided to take the bus that stopped just across the street from the law school. As he waited for the bus, Shawn was talking to his girlfriend on the phone when he noticed a police car drive slowly by. Then it drove by again and circled a third time. On the fourth pass, the officer pulled up behind him and sat for approximately three minutes, with the car's floodlight shining on the bus stall in which Shawn sat.

Then Shawn was startled to hear a blow horn order for him to put his hands out where they could be seen and to turn slowly toward the light. As Shawn did so, with his phone still in his hand, he saw that an officer who had stepped out of the cruiser was reaching for his holster and drawing his gun. Another law student, a white female whom Shawn did not know, who had also been waiting for the bus, yelled out to the officer that what Shawn

had in his hand was only a cell phone. The officer yelled for Shawn to drop it, which he did. The officer then told Shawn to place his hands against the wall and not move. The officer immediately handcuffed and frisked him.

Shawn asked what was happening and explained that he was a student at the law school just across the street and was waiting for the bus to go home, but the officer ignored his explanation. By this point, approximately seven other police cars had arrived and had blocked off the street. At the same time, students and professors from Shawn's law school began to form a crowd across the street, but no one made a move to assist him. He felt humiliated.

The police cursed at him and ordered him to cooperate. He did so, but they repeatedly kicked at his legs and ankles, forcing his legs farther and farther apart until he was spread-eagled. They kept pushing his face against the wall or down toward his chest, telling him to keep his head down and stop resisting. He was frisked two more times and his wallet taken. His schoolbooks and laptop were dumped out on the sidewalk; his grocery bags were emptied as well. He was restrained by three officers, who held his handcuffed hands together with the slack from the back of his shirt and pants to prevent him from running away. They questioned him roughly, showing no respect for him as a law-abiding citizen.

When Shawn again asked what was going on, he was told he fit the description of someone involved in a shooting a few blocks away. Just then, one of the officer's radios crackled, “Black male, 5'8”, blue button-down shirt, khaki tan dress pants, brown dress shoes.” The description fit Shawn exactly. Having heard himself being described over the radio, he was convinced that he was going to jail.

After 10 minutes of Shawn's being forced to stand straddled, physically restrained, and handcuffed in front of his peers and professors, another radio announcement let the officers know that the suspect had been apprehended. The policemen removed Shawn's handcuffs and told him to have a seat. The officers who were standing around returned to their vehicles and drove off while the officer who made the initial stop remained and took down Shawn's information for the police report. As the officer filled out the form, he attempted to make small talk with Shawn, who felt humiliated and was still afraid, but mostly angry at the lack of respect he had received and the clear racial profiling that had just taken place.

During the commotion, a group of white neighbors had congregated on an adjacent corner behind the

police car barricade. As the officer took down Shawn's information, a neighbor came up to the officer and, in front of Shawn, asked if Shawn was "the guy." The officer replied that no, it turned out to be someone else. The neighbor, whispering within Shawn's hearing, offered to follow Shawn home to make sure. The officer said that would not be necessary.

Shawn later heard on the local news that the actual suspect was the victim's college roommate, who was just playing around and accidentally discharged the gun. He was a white male. Shawn realized that it was the neighbors who had called the cops and provided his description. They had heard that there was a shooting in the neighborhood, and when they saw Shawn, who had been living in the neighborhood for three years, standing on the corner at night, they called the police, having concluded that this black male must be the suspect. These were the neighbors who had stared at him every day and avoided eye contact as he walked by them on the sidewalk on his way to and from law school (adapted from Anderson 2011:249–52).

Beyond the issue of security, the public association of blacks with the inner-city ghetto and the black person's perennial definition as outsider causes whites and others to develop an almost universally low opinion of black people as a racial category. White resistance to the fact of black equality also taps deeper attitudes of racial feeling born of group positional arrangements in which blacks have historically been regarded as a lowly class (see Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999; Omi and Winant 2014). It is from this lowly perceptual place that black people emerge, and its historic and cultural manifestation is the iconic ghetto, now an increasingly powerful racial symbol.

## THE BREWERY: WHITE SPACE INVADES THE GHETTO

Deep into West Philadelphia, an old fire station houses a restaurant and brewery. For decades this neighborhood was at the center of the black ghetto, but it is now being gentrified. Its large Victorian houses have become highly attractive to developers and white homebuyers. I once resided in the more middle-class part of this community and engaged in ethnographic fieldwork there for many years, so I observed the place changing over time. The line between poor black and mixed, middle-class areas moved deeper into the ghetto. The formerly black area has a growing number of young white professionals and students as well as a few residents who are Asian or Latino.

The brewery appears as a white space in the middle of the ghetto. Its clientele and workforce are overwhelmingly white and drawn mainly from the local neighborhood. I have visited this setting on numerous occasions, and on one such visit, on a warm Saturday evening in August, I counted 55 whites and 2 African Americans distributed about the four-top tables in the restaurant, at the bar, and on the sidewalk outside. The 11 employees included 1 black male waiter, 1 black male food preparer, 2 white male food preparers, 3 white male waiters, 2 white female bartenders, an Asian female cashier, and a white female *maître d'*. Young to middle-aged white people congregate here to enjoy premium-quality freshly brewed beer and a non-descript American cuisine of hamburgers, fries, pizza, and fancy green salads. The brewery has become an attractive watering hole for the young professionals and students who live in the neighborhood.

But for many local black residents, who are mainly working class or poor, the brewery represents the vanguard of a white invasion. The blacks resent its presence and few would ever think of patronizing this place. On this August evening, young blacks walked stiffly as they made their way through the diners occupying tables and chairs on the sidewalk they once thought of as their own. Some marched right on by, posing as indifferent while resenting what is clearly a significant racial symbol. Others were more direct, scowling as they passed by this crowd. A few young black men in small groups displayed stern, almost angry looks.

Meanwhile, the white clientele seemed generally comfortable. Some were oblivious of the mood of these passersby, while others sent snide or angry looks at the black "interlopers" or passersby who would dare to disturb their meals. Invested in a posture of being at home in this environment, the brewery patrons displayed nonchalance and appeared unaware of the situational irony, their displacement of the previous black inhabitants from what has been historically their space.

The fire station that originally occupied the space was replaced by a farmer's market that catered to the neighborhood's increasingly diverse residents. During this time, Saturday mornings buzzed with commercial activity and social interchange as middle-class white and black patrons joined working-class and poor black shoppers. A wide array of vegetables and fresh fish and meats was readily available. The market employed a good number of local black residents in a range of jobs, from butchering meat and tending produce stalls to setting up and cleaning up.

Perhaps most significantly, the farmer's market served as a kind of community center, where people of widely different backgrounds came together and interacted across the color line. Here friends bumped into friends and shared sociability, catching up with one another and with the latest community news or gossip. It was a prime example of what I call a "cosmopolitan canopy," an island of racial and ethnic civility in a sea of segregated living (see Anderson 2011). The setting served as a point of social convergence that afforded locals and others an opportunity to observe one another up close and to engage people who were strange to them. A relatively small cadre of white community activists established the market and encouraged their friends and acquaintances to shop there. When it first appeared, the market provoked curiosity and even wonder from local black residents. Because it performed a vital community service, the market earned the respect and protection of the local people.

When the brewery bought out the farmer's market, the whole situation changed from what had been a cosmopolitan canopy to a much more racially homogenous enterprise, which black residents typically regard as a white space. The setting still provides people from different worlds with an opportunity, or even an excuse, to observe one another up close from a position of relative security, but they are seldom drawn into social intercourse with strangers. And those who come together here are now virtually all white.

As the neighborhood becomes marginally improved, whites are emboldened to move in and lay claim to a public space that for generations has been regarded as black. The process of gentrification follows the outlines I described earlier with respect to Powelton Village, the subject of *Streetwise* (Anderson 1990). Similar racial dynamics appear to be at work in this area today, as the property values are double and triple those of just six years ago.

Across the street from what is now the brewery is a park where until recently local working-class black residents gathered for church picnics and their children played. Idle black men also hung out there, drinking and socializing, playing cards and checkers, whiling away their days and evenings together. For some of these men, a liquor store conveniently located across the street provided easy access to a "taste" whenever they felt like it or could get up the money. At that time, the park was not a place to be at night, when homeboys, drug dealers, stick-up boys, and others effectively claimed it as their own.

Over the past decade, this element was checked or driven away, and community activists have cleaned up the park. Now an outdoor jazz concert is held there on Friday nights, weather permitting, to which all kinds of people are welcome, though the takers are mainly local black people and a few white urban dwellers. Black men of a higher caliber now hang out in the park, at times with their families, and gentrifying whites bring their own children here. Expensive play equipment has been installed, and the police are a more regular presence. These changes have produced an uneasy mix of working-class blacks and middle-class, racially tolerant whites. In this setting, the two groups tolerate one another in passing but fail to interact very much.

Only a few years ago, black people were the dominant presence in this area, and at night they still are, as whites defer to the presence of blacks in public. When the police are not so visible, the whites tend to be especially guarded, and newly arrived whites may resist venturing onto the streets after dark at all. But a beachhead has been established, and most whites have become emboldened. The brewery restaurant constitutes a cultural and economic manifestation of this area's ongoing, major shift from a black space to a white space.

## CONCLUSION

The black ghetto has become a major icon in American society and culture, and as such it has also become an important source of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination. Despite the progressive changes wrought by the racial incorporation process of the 1960s and 1970s, the color line persists—albeit in a new, emergent form—particularly in those circumstances in which the black body faces acute challenges to its everyday life and existence, most commonly in what many blacks have come to perceive categorically as the white space.

Moreover, the racially black and white homogeneous spaces on either side of that line promote a basic confusion between race and class; black skin is typically equated with lower-class status and white skin with privilege. In this way, the negative image of the iconic ghetto and the notion that all blacks come from the ghetto serve to justify the normative sensibility of the white space that excludes or marginalizes blacks, and in which blacks are unexpected, and when present require explanation.

White urbanites often have material and symbolic interests in making the implications of this racial hierarchy unavoidable. In fact, they tend to reify this principle, regardless of the actual

socioeconomic position of the black persons to whom it is applied. That makes it real in the sense of W. I. Thomas's (1969) famous theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." Today, the iconic ghetto and its relation to the white space form the basis of a potent and provocative new form of racism. The old racism created the ghetto. The Civil Rights Movement opened its gates, and a new black middle class emerged. But the new form of symbolic racism emanating from the iconic ghetto hovers, stigmatizing by degrees black people as they navigate the white space.

## REFERENCES

- Alba, Richard D., John R. Logan, and Brian Stults. 2000. "How Segregated Are Middle-class African Americans?" *Social Problems* 47:543–58.
- Anderson, Elijah. 1978. *A Place on the Corner: A Study of Black Streetcorner Men*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Anderson, Elijah. 1990. *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Anderson, Elijah. 2011. *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Anderson, Elijah. 2012. "The Iconic Ghetto." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 642:8–24.
- Anderson, Elijah, Duke Austin, Craig Holloway, and Vani Kulkarni, 2012. "The Legacy of Racial Caste." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 642:25–42.
- Anderson, Elijah. 2014. "What Caused the Ferguson Riot Exists in so Many Other Cities, too." Accessed November 25, 2014 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/08/13/what-caused-the-ferguson-riot-exists-in-so-many-other-cities-too/>).
- Becker, Howard S. 1973. *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Free Press.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1958. "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position." *Pacific Sociological Review* 1:3–7.
- Bobo, L. 1999. "Prejudice as Group Position: Micro-foundations of a Sociological Approach to Racism and Race Relations." *Journal of Social Issues* 55:445–72.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2013. *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Clark, Kenneth B. 1965. *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Davis, Allison and Burleigh Gardner. 2009. *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*. Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press.
- Dollard, John. 1957. *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Drake, St. Clair and Horace Cayton. 1945. *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Duneier, Mitchell. 2000. *Sidewalk*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1899. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Feagin, Joe. 2006. *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression*. New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group.
- Frazier, E. Franklin. 1962. *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States*. New York: Scribner.
- Goffman, Alice. 2014. *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Hughes, Everett C. 1944. "Dilemmas and Contradictions of Status." *American Journal of Sociology* 50:353–59.
- Jackson, Ronald L. 1999. "White Space, White Privilege: Mapping Discursive Inquiry into the Self." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85:38–54.
- Jaynes, Gerald D. 2004. "Immigration and the Social Construction of Otherness: Underclass Stigma and Intergroup Relations." In *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States*, edited by N. Foner and G. M. Fredrickson. New York, Russell Sage.
- Kirshenman, J. and K. M. Neckerman. 1991. "We'd Love to Hire Them, but . . .": *The Meaning of Race for Employers. The Urban Underclass*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Lacy, Karyn. 2007. *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Landry, Bart. 1988. *The New Black Middle Class*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya. 1990. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Logan, John R. and Charles Zhang. 2010. "Global Neighborhoods: New Pathways to Diversity and Separation" *American Journal of Sociology* 115:1069–109.
- Massey, Douglas A. and Nancy A. Denton. 1998. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Ogletree, Charles. 2010. *The Presumption of Guilt: The Arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Race, Class, and Crime in America*. New York: Palgrave Macmillian.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 2014. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- Park, Robert E., Ernest Burgess, and Rod McKenzie. 1925. *The City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pattillo, Mary. 2013. *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pierce, Chester. 1970. "Offensive Mechanisms." In *The Black 70's*, edited by F. B. Barbour. Boston: Porter Sargent.
- Robinson, Eugene. 2010. *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. New York: Doubleday.
- Sears, David O. and P. J. Henry. 2003. "The Origins of Symbolic Racism." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85:259–75.
- Thomas, William I. 1969. *The Definition of the Situation. In Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology*. New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Venkatesh, Sudhir. 2009. *Off the Books: The Underground Economy of the Urban Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Wacquant, Loic. 2007. *Urban Outcasts*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Wicker, Tom. 1968. *U.S. Riot Commission Report: Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. New York: Bantam Books
- Wilson, William J. 1978. *The Declining Significance of Race*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, William J. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Elijah Anderson** is the William K. Lanman, Jr. Professor of Sociology at Yale University. His publications include *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (1999), winner of the Komarovsky Award from the Eastern Sociological Society; *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (1990), winner of the American Sociological Association's Robert E. Park Award for the best published book in the area of Urban Sociology; and the classic sociological work, *A Place on the Corner* (1978; 2nd ed., 2003). Anderson's most recent ethnographic work, *The Cosmopolitan Canopy: Race and Civility in Everyday Life*, was published by WW Norton in March 2012. Professor Anderson is the 2013 recipient of the prestigious Cox-Johnson-Frazier Award of the American Sociological Association.