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IN MEDIAS RACE (AND CLASS): Post-Jim Crow Ethnographies of Black Middleclassdom

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Abstract

“Race is the modality in which class is lived” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 394). That’s how Stuart Hall evocatively put it, emphasizing the extent to which class relations can actually and substantively “function as race relations” for working class Black Brits (and others). He was arguing, amongst other things, against the neatly reified distinctions scholars traditionally policed between class-based analyses and racial ones.

Disciplines

Communication | Critical and Cultural Studies | Demography, Population, and Ecology | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Inequality and Stratification | Politics and Social Change | Race and Ethnicity | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments

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IN MEDIAS RACE (AND CLASS)

Post-Jim Crow Ethnographies of Black Middleclassdom

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MICHELLE R. BOYD, *Jim Crow Nostalgia: Reconstructing Race in Bronzeville*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 211 pages, ISBN 978-0-8166-4678-4. Paper, \$13.00.

KARYN R. LACY, *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class and Status in the New Black Middle Class*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007, 281 pages, ISBN 978-0-520-25116-8. Paper, \$22.95.

MARY PATTILLO, *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 388 pages, ISBN 978-0-226-64932-0. Paper, \$20.00.

“Race is the modality in which class is lived” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 394). That’s how Stuart Hall evocatively put it, emphasizing the extent to which class relations can actually and substantively “function as race relations” for working class Black Brits (and others). He was arguing, amongst other things, against the neatly reified distinctions scholars traditionally policed between class-based analyses and racial ones.

It is easy enough to proclaim that social identities are “articulated categories,” to repeat, ad nauseum, that they are all mutually constitutive and just about impossible to practically disentangle. However, it is quite another thing to construct a social scientific research project that aptly demonstrates the significance of such ineluctable imbrications. The organizing principles of our linear logics almost mandate that we choose sides (analytically speaking), which allows us to slip back into either/or constructions of identificatory possibility. Indeed, our conceptual models seem to demand no less.

I am certainly, and unabashedly, guilty of as much in some of my own work, choosing to privilege “raciality” as my central heuristic device for experimenting

with contemporary cultural logics of social difference and inequality. Race is especially good to think with, anthropologically, because it appears to take such little conscious thought at all.¹

Race is most difficult to spy when it boasts a too-confident self-evidence, when it appears easiest to see, its very visibility a trap of Foucauldian proportions: discourse possessing a productive force that includes eliding its own generative powers by hiding them inside the creases of an ever-receding horizon of prediscursivity. Such blinding visibility, an example of staring straight into the textual sun in search of retrospectively concocted origins, organizes racial identity's social and cultural power, its sloppily effective work as history and mythology at the same time, a mythology passing itself off as history, its mythologic no less potent once unmasked as biological fiction.

Race's sociocultural efficacy is a byproduct of its everyday slipperiness, its squishy im/materiality. And one aspect of that squishiness pivots on its peek-a-boo relationship with class, a "serious game" of Three-Card Monte that fools us all the time, even and especially when we are playing with a marked category of Blackness inflected by ostensibly "un-American" invocations of "class," the latter being just about any invocation of class other than the over-determined tropes of catch-all (though implicitly *White*) middleclassness or easily demonizable (and emphatically *Black/Brown*) underclassness.² Three recent ethnographies conspire to dramatically reconfigure academic and popular discussions about the inextricable linkages between racial identity and class positionality in Black American life, offering hope that our sedimented presuppositions about classed racialities and racialized class subjectivities are changing, ever so slowly, in productive and empirically grounded ways.

Sociologist Karyn Lacy sets out to challenge one-size-fits-all renditions of Black middle class subjectivity in her book *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class*. Whether they are depicted as thriving because of their purported distance from the debilitating Black poor or as raging against the proximity and ubiquity of inescapable White racism, Black middleclassness is almost always discussed as a social singularity grammatically marked with a definite article: *The* Black Middle Class. To a certain extent, it is already assumed that the reader implicitly knows the group being discussed (its corporate beginnings and ends), and that this Black middleclass is, in fact, one clear and obvious entity—at its most far-flung, Black folks seemingly unpurloined by the culture of poverty's conspicuous depravities. But Lacy wants to trouble such presumptions. Not only is there an ostensible rupture between old and new Black middleclasses, as Landry (1988) and others have stipulated; Lacy also wants to carve the latter group up into relatively distinct sub-categories.

She starts with the difference that suburbanization makes, arguing for the significance of residential life beyond the teeming and gentrifying city. Suburban developers are responsible, she says, for prefabbing more than just the design models of individual homes in cushy cul-de-sacs of bourgeois gentility. They impose their "vision of community" on suburban residents as a function of "the physical aspects of the community ['modified grid patterns,' 'routinized home construction,' menus of aesthetic/designerly options, and even government-sponsored interstate highways] and through covenants incorporated into the homeowners' deeds [requiring specific instantiations of 'middle-class civility and manners']" (p. 70). Lacy makes it clear that suburban middleclassness is decidedly different from urban varieties—a difference that was purposefully and self-consciously promoted by the likes of the Levitts as early as the middle of the last century.

Lacy also reminds us that some members of the so-called Black middle class are more or less accomplished and well-off than others ("elite" vs. "core" middle classes),

but she emphasizes the fact that other variables are valuable in determining how middle class Black suburbanites differently negotiate (using what she calls, rewiring Swidler, a “Black middle class tool kit”) the complicated connections between relative class privilege and potential racial stigmatization. Lacy shows the situationally specific “boundary-work” (à la Barth) that links everyday interracial decisions to residential location, to the kinds of neighborhoods that people call home and the divergent consequences of such choices. For Blacks living in predominantly Black middle class suburbs, Lacy maintains, “geographic community” reinforces a sense of racial authenticity/solidarity and grounds it in the specificities of a local neighborhood. For Blacks living in predominantly White suburbs, maintaining a robust sense of racial identity and a “desire for racially distinct spaces” require recourse to what Lacy calls an “ideological community,” a strategic attempt to take advantage of the joy that comes from intra-racial congregation, even as those same suburbanites make very clear (and arguably counterintuitive) distinctions between those race-mates worthy of fellowship and the ones disqualified from full racial membership. Lacy finds, for instance, “elite” Blacks who more stridently police the boundaries between themselves and “core” middle class Blacks than they do the fault-lines that separate them from impoverished Black people.

Lacy demonstrates some of the ways in which race inflects class realities, both in public spaces (where anonymity breeds potential drive-by racial stereotyping) and in private ones (where the comforts of interracial social intimacy help to beat back some of the harsh vulgarities of John/Jane Doe racism). Moreover, Lacy shows that vernacularly proffered intra-group differences have a profound impact on how parents socialize their children and on the status-based assimilative models they use to reproduce their social position and to bequeath cultural capital to future generations.

While Lacy’s compelling ethnographic research attempts to capture nuances and variations within the suburbs of Washington D.C., Mary Pattillo’s magisterial offering, *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City*, plops us down in Chicago, midwestern America’s quintessential space of urban analysis and ethnographic exploration. Pattillo wants to unpack the political and social implications of differently classed Black actors attempting to negotiate a complicated urban landscape in the throes of gentrifying change. Providing a robust historical context for her discussion (including a lengthy summary of one hundred years in the life of a particular property, a detailed analysis of the 1969 Gautreaux court case and its continuing impact on contemporary housing issues and on the Chicago Housing Authority’s action/policies, and a glimpse at the controversies surrounding the University of Chicago’s relationship to the community, including its North Kenwood/Oakland Charter School), Pattillo wants to analyze “Black middlemen” as powerful go-betweens (almost would-be trickster figures) responsible for merging the often divergent interests separating wealthy White politicians, developers, and homeowners from low-income Black residents and activists.

First and foremost, Pattillo argues, Black middlemen actually create housing markets where none existed before, demanding the return of services, investment dollars, and loan options that had long vanished. They are also tethered to those “above” and “below” them, sincerely committed (even if in vacillating and ambiguous ways) to their interdependent relationships with elite Whites and poorer Blacks. And this fact is why Pattillo would probably not accept my passing characterization of her middlemen as trickster figures. “This vacillation,” she writes, “is not necessarily a strategic or instrumental maneuver” (p. 118). These Black middlemen are not just skilled at gaming the system, “playing both sides against the middle,” as the saying goes. Even at their most boisterous and self-aggrandizing, they are less “sig-

nifying monkey” than mouse in a maze, beholden to the logic of a political machinery that predetermines their options and delimits their rewards. Pattillo admits that there might be some monkey business going on backstage, but her “ethnographic eye” doesn’t allow her access to the rafters. Instead, she explores a useful (and public) typology of relatively “upwardly aligned” and “downwardly aligned” middlemen who leverage their social and cultural capital (as best they can) to broker deals between constituencies that might otherwise be mutually unintelligible.

In one of the book’s most powerful chapters, Pattillo shows how public discourse about crime and its links to “public housing” increase the difficulty of coalitional politics across the (private) homeowner/(public) renter divide, casting low-income residents as the very danger and threat that anti-crime provisions are supposed to counteract—ratcheting up commitments to class-specific surveillance of poorer, long-standing residents in service to the desires and fantasies of newer, wealthier Black gentrifiers. The celebratory rhetoric of mixed-income housing gets humbled with Pattillo’s discussion of how easily such mixtures (even as welcome solutions to problems of hyper-segregation) reproduce class-based power dynamics and logics of social exclusion that complicate any essentialized assumptions about racial solidarity and the politics of Black urbanity. Her deployment of Black middlemen is meant to proffer a different discussion about what Cathy Cohen (1999) labeled “secondary marginalization,” the idea, as Pattillo puts it, that “some groups are simultaneously dominated and dominators,” (p. 303) using the former status as a kind of justificatory cloak for the latter (or, at least, for the latter’s under-thematization).

Michelle R. Boyd, a political scientist, seems a little harsher on Pattillo’s “Black middlemen,” these racial brokers who gain from a certain exploitation of intraracial differences that they sometimes concomitantly and self-interestedly deny. At other moments, as demonstrated in Pattillo’s aforementioned criminality discussion, they can just as self-servingly demand that such intraracial distinctions get codified and reinforced. Boyd’s *Jim Crow Nostalgia: Reconstructing Race in Bronzeville* asks us to think about how concoctions of the racial past get deployed to justify particularly classed configurations of the racial present. Indeed, what does it mean for African Americans to wax nostalgic about the Jim Crow era? What manner of ideological nostalgia is this? Boyd compellingly uses this question as scaffolding for a larger discussion (based on her ethnographic research in Chicago) about how Black leaders mobilize racial segregation (past and present) for their own political and economic gain.

Boyd exposes elements of a Black leadership class that cynically mobilize racial solidarity and constructions of a “glorious,” racially-segregated urban past to promote their own class interests. Indeed, both Lacy and Pattillo depict middle class Blacks capable of privileging class interests over racial ones. And Steven Gregory’s (1998) ethnography of neighborhood politics in Queens, New York, is another example of what just such a move looks like—and of how it is predicated (at least in part) on specific governmental policies of municipal re-organization. Other political scientists have demonstrated the Faustian pact that Black leadership often enters into as a function of its attempt to court elite White votes and financial support. But Boyd is even more leery about the implications of the kinds of inter-racial brokerage politicking that Pattillo unpacks. Boyd wants us to recognize that “racial authentication may be thought of as a process of claiming and establishing one’s adherence to expectations of blackness” (p. 104) so as to reconfigure them for one’s class-based advantage, having your racial cake and eating it (and denying the same gastronomic pleasure to lower-class race-mates who can hardly afford to partake of the very cake that their racialized presence has helped bake).

Once again, we see race and class in all their mutual complicity. For Boyd, class is the modality in which race is lived, and she offers an example of how cultural/racial heritage can be an effective handmaiden to class-based exploitation. According to Boyd, class relations don't just naturally or effortlessly function as race/racializable relations for Black subjects. They can also be quite purposefully manipulated to pander to racial solidarity while buttressing class-based exclusivity. Of course, this should not be interpreted to mean that the "social fact" of race is merely epiphenomenal, nothing but a ruse for class warfare. All three of these social scientists demonstrate something else entirely: that the complex and context-specific consanguinities of race and class beg for careful empirical analyses over and against any scholarly and/or vernacular presumptions that pass (sometimes, all too easily) for actual evidence on the matter.

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NOTES

1. Of course, class is equally interesting to think with in a contemporary American context where its serious interrogation is almost unthinkable, lest one be labeled socialist and anti-American.
2. For an anthropological discussion of "serious games," see Sherry Ortner's *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (1996).

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