Walking the Intraracial Tightrope: Balancing Exclusion and Inclusion within an Elite Black Social Club

Thesis

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Abstract

How social groups manage inclusion and exclusion is fundamental to sociology. This tension is especially complex for segments of marginalized groups on the edges of social integration. Historically, middle- and upper-class African Americans have formed social organizations in response to racial exclusion. Seeking acceptance into the white world has nevertheless caused Black elites to engage in intraracial demarcation, distinguishing themselves from their lower-class counterparts and potentially hindering within-group solidarity. In the post-Civil Rights era, racism persists and the Black elite experience intraracial isolation and its associated negative emotional outcomes. How do a tightly managed affiliation, and other aspects of boundary work, play out in private Black spaces? Drawing on 40 observations of an elite African American men’s social club and 20 interviews with individual members in addition to theoretical insights from race and boundary work scholarship this paper explores how the Black elite negotiates the tensions of exclusion and inclusion within their social organizational life. Boundary work remains relevant in these settings, but exclusivity must be carefully managed in consideration of organizational sustenance and a sense of class-informed racial belonging. I propose a theory of intraracial collective assimilation to explain how Black elites use racially homogenous spaces to affirm both class and racial identities in the production of emotional strength.
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Introduction

Exclusion and inclusion have been central to sociology since its inception, making clear the processes and motivations underlying the formation of social groups rooted in social differentiation (Durkheim, 2001; Simmel, 1971) and distinctive lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1984; Weber, 1946). There is particular nuance embedded in the exclusionary and inclusionary processes of stigmatized groups (Lamont et al., 2016) as they use symbolic boundaries to convey their proximity to the social core and distance themselves from stigmatized others. Negotiating these boundaries is particularly salient for segments of marginalized groups straddling the edges of deference systems (Shils, 1969). The Black elite is one such group.

The Black elite has historically faced racial barriers despite their achieved socioeconomic status. De jure and de facto segregation did not distinguish between African Americans, enforcing the color line irrespective of class background. To counteract discrimination middle- and upper-class African Americans heeded Du Bois’s call for the Talented Tenth, seeking racial uplift via commitment to conventional behavior (Gaines, 1996), and using their own position as both a model to emulate and an indicator of their distinctiveness. Still unable to penetrate mainstream society notwithstanding their efforts, the Black elite, like African Americans broadly, compensated by forming their own social organizations (Frazier, 1957; Myrdal, 1944;
Orum, 1966). Through their organizational life the Black elite limited their associations to their “kind of people” as a way to attain and secure status.

Greater access to integrated environments in the post-civil rights era has complicated the boundary-making processes underlying the Black elite’s organizational life. While class-based identity affirmation remains relevant, their participation in social organizations today is primarily viewed as a means of preserving intraracial ties in their increasingly integrated worlds (Lacy, 2004, 2007). Meanwhile, the Black elite’s immersion in primarily white settings exposes them to much racism (Benjamin, 1991; Feagin and Sykes, 1995), contributing to feelings of distrust (Anderson, 2012) and even rage (Cose, 1995). In what ways, then, does boundary work play out within a contemporary elite Black social club? How do they balance exclusionary and inclusionary processes as they simultaneously seek to construct intraracial boundaries and counteract feelings of seclusion? Lastly, how might emotional dynamics inform these processes and organizational participation?

Through an in-depth case study of the Founders Club, this paper explores the tensions imbued in the social organizational life of the Black elite as they navigate exclusionary and inclusionary dynamics.¹ Social and symbolic boundaries remain relevant, and the latter is especially embedded within the processes of joining the organization. As members seek to counteract feelings of seclusion while maintaining exclusivity, boundary work must be carefully negotiated to not compromise

¹ To protect the identity of the club and its individual members the name of the club and the names of members have been changed.
organizational sustenance. At the same time, boundary-making processes foster a sense of belonging informed by race and class whereby membership in the organization reaffirms racial pride. I propose the theory of *intraracial collective assimilation* to explain how in compensating for intraracial isolation the Black elite use racially-homogenous spaces to affirm both middle class and racial identities in the production of emotional strength. Thus, the paper uses boundary work scholars’ analytical tools (Lacy 2007; Lamont 1992; Lamont et al. 2016) to address Frazier’s (1957) unresolved questions regarding the Black elite’s ambiguous social status.
The Genealogy of Boundary Work among the Black Elite

A penchant to be accepted by white society has a long history among middle- and upper-class African Americans. Encountering racism despite their achieved socioeconomic status has often caused affluent Blacks to distance themselves from their disadvantaged counterparts socially (Du Bois, 1899; Drake and Cayton, 1945; Lacy, 2007), engage in “politics of respectability” by condemning behavior among their group deemed indecent (Higginbotham, 1993), and imitate the lifestyles of similarly socioeconomically situated whites (Frazier, 1957). In other words, the Black elite has historically relied on boundary work to differentiate themselves from lower-class blacks and affirm their greater social status. Social organizations have commonly been used to achieve these ends.

Du Bois (1899) first documented the various class strata within the African American community and the ways Black social organizations reflect and reinforce class divisions. As centers of social intercourse, churches maintained class distinctions with “[e]ach church form[ing] its own social circle, and not many stray[ing] beyond its bounds.” (p. 204) Middle-class Blacks disassociated themselves from the churches of the Black masses and their related behaviors to avoid slights to their sense of dignity. Thus, middle-class Black Philadelphians carefully selected how to express their faith in a way conducive to the preservation of social esteem. The main institution of the Black
community, then, helped maintain social distinctions, acting as an institutional embodiment of the class pyramid and signifying one’s position in it. The church, however, was not alone in serving this role.

In *Black Metropolis* (1945) Drake and Cayton thoroughly detail Bronzeville’s social structure and examine the strategies used by the community’s middle and upper crusts to erect boundaries and secure status. They particularly highlight the prominent role social clubs played in accentuating the social hierarchy through a variety of boundary-making processes. Expected to be proficient in the realm of social ritual, club participation was integral to the upper-class lifestyle. Described as having “a fetish of ‘exclusiveness,’” (p. 534) these organizations circumscribed their memberships to individuals who met their standards of decency and ambition. Inclusion in these social clubs provided individuals with social prestige, distinguishing the accomplished and those “on the make” from lower-class Blacks and helping dictate the type of behavior which would advance the race.

While less restrictive than their upper-class counterparts, middle-class clubs maintained certain standards as well. Being a member necessitated compliance with “the middle-class ideals of restrained public deportment and ‘respectability.’” While these rules governed middle-class clubs’ entertaining practices, varying degrees of elaborateness characterized the dances and formals held by these organizations as they pursued social esteem. “The Kool Kustomers,” for example, “were willing to spend money for prestige.” (p. 700). By engaging in this type of conspicuous consumption,
clubs created and reinforced an organizational status hierarchy in addition to “respectable” identities for their members.

Intraracial demarcation remains relevant to the lives of the Black elite today (Anderson, 2012; Jackson 2003; Lacy, 2007; Lamont and Fleming, 2005; Pattillo, 2007). According to Lacy (2007), middle-class Blacks rely on both exclusionary and inclusionary boundary work in public spaces, attempting to respectively distinguish themselves from lower-class Blacks and signify their similarity to middle-class whites. Middle-class Blacks use both socioeconomic and moral signifiers, such as place of residence and work ethic, to erect intraracial class boundaries and counter instances of discrimination. In their pursuit of status reproduction Lacy’s participants also engaged in intraclass demarcation by spending money in varying ways to maintain certain lifestyles.

Lacy’s work certainly show the conscientiousness of middle- and upper-class African Americans in distinguishing themselves from being perceived as part of a homogenous mass of low income Blacks. They carefully negotiate their interactions in public space to affirm their socioeconomic positions (see also Anderson 2012; Pattillo, 2007). Due to the time they spend in majority-white settings, whether at the workplace or in their residential communities, Black elites risk facing racism on a constant basis (Benjamin, 1991; Feagin and Sykes, 1995). Experiencing tokenism, especially at the workplace, makes what Benjamin (1991) terms “race watching,” rooted in Du Bois’s idea of double consciousness and the veil, a common practice. According to Du Bois (1903), in addition to their own self-reflection, Blacks are able and obligated to consider white’s assessment of their behavior through the veil, and it is behind the veil where Blacks’ true
selves exist. Similarly, race watching refers to the practice of constantly scrutinizing one’s social surroundings to detect racism and be able to navigate racially-charged interactions while walking the “racial tightrope.” Benjamin finds that relying on race watching is particularly important for Black elites because they are often tokens within their work settings, which can foster stress and a feeling of social rejection (Jackson and Stewart, 2003). In fact, recent work indicates a relationship between upward mobility and the Black-white gap in self-reported health (Colen et al., 2017) in addition to physical health risks (Turner et al., 2017).

The stressors tied to upward mobility for Blacks reflect Wilkins and Pace’s (2014 p. 389) assertion that “studies of the Black middle class offer a useful vantage point on the ways experiences of racism contribute to negative emotions independent of socioeconomic stress.” Due to their multiple status locations middle-class Blacks experience nuanced emotional processes. Racism can override the protective functions of middle-class Blacks’ achieved socioeconomic status on their emotional well-being. In fact, their class position may “increase their exposure to stress and discrimination” due to the contexts they are embedded in (Wilkins and Pace, 2014, p. 389). This is especially relevant at the workplace where middle-class Blacks may feel a strong sense of isolation in a majority-white context and racialized feeling rules constrain how African American professionals are able to express themselves in conformity with emotional expectations (Wingfield, 2010).²

² Feeling rules refer to the norms governing the exchange and expression of emotions in a particular context or setting. In the case of professional workplaces, white middle class norms provide the basis for feeling rules and consequently undermine the neutrality of emotional guidelines (Hochschild 1983).
Considering the Black elite’s encounters and/or perceptions of racism on a daily basis it is not surprising that they seek racially-homogenous spaces. All-Black support networks can affirm racial pride and thus serve as “emotional shields” (Wilkins and Pace, 2014, p. 390). As opposed to feeling race negatively in predominantly white environments where there may be an overwhelming sense of isolation, being among fellow Blacks can reinforce a positive image of one’s racial identity. They can express themselves fully, behaving unconstrained and revealing their true emotions without the pressures associated with being a token. Where, then, are these safe spaces, and how do the interactional processes within these settings play out?
The Functions of African American Social Organizations

Prior research has highlighted several functions of African American institutions, such as providing material and moral support (Taylor, 1979) and their importance in the fostering of social change (McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1986). Du Bois (1899) details the presence and unique purposes of important Black social organizations beyond the church, including secret societies (i.e. the Masons, the Odd Fellows), beneficial organizations, and insurance societies among others. For example, the Odd Fellows used their $46,000 worth of property in the city to engage in philanthropy, providing money for funerals, orphans, widows, and the sick (Du Bois, 1899, pp. 221-224). According to Du Bois, the function of the secret society is partly social intercourse and partly insurance. They furnish pastime from the monotony of work, a field for ambition and intrigue, a chance for parade, and insurance against misfortune (Du Bois, 1899, p.224).

During the time of Du Bois’s study and for over half of the twentieth century, African American social organizations provided Blacks with resources and venues that Jim Crow segregation prohibited them from accessing. Beyond their philanthropic and social insurance functions, Black social organizations provided safe spaces for sociability in the pre-civil rights era.

Myrdal (1944) concluded that African Americans actively participated in associations because of the organizational exclusion they experienced in daily life. However, while Myrdal characterized Blacks’ exaggerated participation in voluntary
organizations during this time as pathological, Orum (1966) articulated it as one of compensation. African Americans’ tendency to participate in voluntary organizations was a response to segregation and an attempt to “compensate for social deprivations incurred by their minority-group status.” (Orum, 1966, pp. 34, 45) Williams et al. (1973) found support for the compensatory hypothesis in comparing voluntary association participation rates between Blacks, whites, and Mexican Americans between late 1969 and early 1970 in Austin, Texas, where the two nonwhite groups faced housing discrimination and segregation. Blacks’ participation rates were significantly higher, reflecting their “fulfilling [of] needs not readily available in the larger society.” (Williams et al., 1978, p. 638)

Frazier (1957), too, characterizes the Black elite's exaggerated emphasis on social life in the early-to-mid twentieth century as a compensatory mechanism. Due to their exclusion from mainstream institutions despite their socioeconomic status, the Black bourgeoisie, Frazier asserts, place great emphasis on the social intercourse within their marginalized social world. However, in his estimation, the centrality of “society” in the lives of the Black bourgeoisie contributes to their “make believe” worlds. It is one of the primary mechanisms used by the Black elite, in vain, to imitate the lives of the white middle-class. According to Frazier, this contributes to a detachment from the struggles of Blacks, and thus makes the lives of the Black bourgeoisie particularly meaningless.

The dynamics of the Black elite’s participation in social organizations has shifted due to changes in race relations. Following the civil rights movement middle class Blacks made substantial gains in the labor and housing markets as discrimination in both
domains relaxed, allowing them to move up the occupational ladder and out of impoverished, inner-city areas (Wilson, 1987). At the same time, their life styles changed as well. With greater access to social venues resulting from desegregation, Landry (1987) found less than a fifth of the “new Black middle class” regularly participated in recreational activities centered on churches, clubs, and socials. The trend among middle-class Blacks mirrors a general decline in civic engagement in American society in recent decades, including involvement in voluntary organizations such as local clubs. In fact, between the 1970s and 1990s, the most pronounced drop in civic activity has occurred among college-educated African Americans (Putnam, 2000).

However, in addition to the consequences of this group’s out-migration for African American communities at large, Blacks experiencing upward mobility also face the risk of encountering another dilemma: escaping the perils of inner-city life and making career progress can come at the expense of their intraracial ties. Locational and occupational attainment increase the social distance between Black elites and the culture, networks, and relationships embedded in Black social worlds. As a result, members of the Black elite may need to actively seek out ways to maintain their connections with the Black world.

Lacy (2007, p. 151) proposes the theory of strategic assimilation to explain the ways the Black elite value racial integration yet pursue racially homogenous spaces in their lives. More than simply a “temporary refuge from discrimination and alienation,” these “Black spaces” are where the Black elite remain in touch with Black culture and “are free to simply enjoy interacting with others Blacks.” While Lacy seeks to move
beyond the monolithic “refuge” understanding of these Black spaces and hints at their affectual characteristics, her analysis centers on how the Black elite uses Jack and Jill, a children’s organization, to ensure their children’s connection to the Black world. Therefore, discerning the interplay between the affirmation of self-identity and group membership (Lamont, 1992) and the role of affect in participatory dynamics within elite Black social organizations for Black elites themselves in the post-Civil Rights era remains unclear.
The Case and the Methods

Through an in-depth case-study of the Founders Club, this paper explores the boundary dynamics within and the socioemotional functions of an elite Black men’s social organization. Founded nearly a century ago in a city I call Langston, the Founders Club was formed by students due to their exclusion from social events at their high school. As the Club’s membership matured it became a social organization for adult African American men. Over the years some of the most prominent African Americans in Langston have held membership in the Club, including civil rights leaders, entrepreneurs, and doctors. Using their own capital the Founders constructed a clubhouse in 1966 which still stands and serves an important role as a private, safe space outside the purview of others’ judgment. There are currently 29 members in the Founders Club, ranging in age from 35 to 85 years-old. The longest standing member has been with the organization since 1975 and the most recent addition came in 2017.

While I have had ongoing contact with the Club for over a year, the majority of the data collection has occurred from September 2017 to the present. Specifically, I draw on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 members of the Founders Club and over 120 hours of participant observation. All of the interviews were conducted at the

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3 I have conducted twenty-eight interviews in total. The other seven include four spouses of members and five community residents. However, their small totals prevent a meaningful analysis of this data.
clubhouse except for one which was done at a member’s home. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The 40 observations mostly occurred at informal gatherings. I also conducted seven field visits at formal gatherings, including three dinners traditionally held before the Club’s monthly meeting and three parties, each of which lasted between approximately one and five hours. Additionally, on eight occasions following interviews I remained at the club and carried out observations for an additional one to four hours. Using my smartphone, I jotted down notes during my observations and used these as references when writing up fieldnotes.

Ethnography enables researchers to get an eye witness account of the “on-the-ground” meaning-making process among participants at the site of interest without the formality and potential hindrances of a conventional interview. Through observations researchers get a firsthand look at the lived experiences of their research participants, getting to know how research participants behave in their customary setting, how they interact with each other and what this indicates about their relationships, and what activities occupy their time. By participating in the field researchers can gauge how research participants interpret and interact within their social world. Nevertheless, interviews compliment participant observation by yielding rich understandings of individuals’ personal backgrounds and enabling research participants to express how they perceive aspects of their daily experiences. Through one-on-one dialogues the interviewer and interviewee engage a meaning-making exchange where both individuals have the opportunity to discuss ideas and make sense of them (Hesse-Biber 2017 p. 106)
Findings

Founders place tremendous value on the fellowship they experience through their participation in the organization. Informed by exclusionary and inclusionary processes, boundary work is carefully managed to affirm a positive racial identity countervailing to stereotypical portrayals of African American men. Thus, they engage in selective fellowship in response to stigmatization. However, selectivity reflects and must be balanced against the need for organizational sustenance. The meaning of fellowship also goes beyond exclusionary dynamics. The racially homogenous safe space allows for inclusion by enabling members to compensate for intraracial isolation and experience positive emotionality by reifying a sense of racial pride. These factors underlie members’ desire to participate in the organization and the affectual nature of their relationships.

The following details the exclusionary and inclusionary mechanisms embedded in the organization. The discussion section analyzes the data by integrating concepts from research on boundary-work, Blacks’ participation in voluntary organizations, social isolation, and the sociology of emotions. I conclude by discussing the gains made by the Black elite, the racism they continue to face, and the persisting importance of African American social organizations for social solidarity among this group.
Boundary Making, Maintenance, and Exclusivity of the Club

The Club maintains social boundaries in several ways. As both barriers to joining the organization and penetrating its physical space, they serve as tangible barriers limiting who can meet membership obligations and conveying to outsiders who can access the Club’s private space. Social boundaries, nevertheless, interact with symbolic boundaries to create physical demarcation and signal to others, sometimes unintentionally, class-informed racial statuses.

The financial obligations members have to meet and the clubhouse are the most overt social boundaries. Joining the Club and sustaining membership necessitates a $500 initiation fee and monthly dues of $125. Wayne, a 42-year-old member and federal agent, admits that the costs can be prohibitive for individuals to join and posits that an inability to afford membership dues may have caused members to quit in the past. Constructed in 1966, the clubhouse serves an important role as a private, safe space for members to fellowship, and access it, for the most part, is restricted to members. Other structural characteristics forming the Club’s property create physical boundaries as well, signifying the Club’s seclusion.

The clubhouse is situated on the corner of an intersection and on grounds adjoining the parking lot of the neighboring property. The sidewalk is limited to the front

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4 Certain events are open to the public and/or invited guests. Relatives of members sometimes rent the Club for a gathering (i.e. baby shower, repass).
of the property where a metal fence closes in the patio and the clubhouse’s front door. A row of tall, green hedges provides a more permeable yet still physical boundary between the rest of the sidewalk and the Club’s parking lot. In combination these physical structures bound the clubhouse’s space, and affirm its private character.

The interplay between the property’s physical boundaries and their symbolic value have become apparent during field visits. Using the parking lot as a tailgating area members customarily set up a tent to grill food and watch football games. The tall hedges and a few feet of grass constitute the border between the sidewalk and members as they eat food, drink, and watch football. Upon noticing the cooking of food and game-watching, passersby, on a few occasions, have stopped while walking on the sidewalk to ask if they could have a bite to eat. “No. Sorry man,” has consistently been the response, quickly dismissing the inquiry. During one of these instances, Gary, a 54-year-old member and corporate executive, immediately followed up the brief interaction with the pedestrian by stating the need to put a fence back up. After inquiring further about it Gary informed me that the fence now surrounding the patio used to extend all the way to the corner of the street, thus providing a more immutable barrier to the sidewalk. By emphasizing the importance of reinstalling the fence Gary reified the need to reconstruct the symbolic boundary distinguishing between the public and the private.

While outsiders are typically unable to see what goes on within the clubhouse and interact with members to learn about their backgrounds, what is visible to the public eye conveys its own meaning. Wayne believes the Club has a good relationship with the local community, but admits that “they might think we’re bougie.” When asked why
community residents may think this way Wayne made reference to the cars driven by members.

Cause, you know, a lot of the, sometimes when we have a full house of members we have like, seven or eight Mercedes Benzs in the parking lot, trucks, Porsche 911s, stuff like that so, you know, the perception of money, can make someone believe that it’s bougie. I’ve heard, I’ve heard statements about it in the past like, “oh, I heard that’s a real bougie club,” or something like that. I’ve heard that type of rhetoric, yeah…they see the cars, and they just, it just goes with the assumption of being bougie you know.

According to Wayne, the presence of luxurious cars may serve as status symbols to the community and ground residents’ perceptions of the Club. However, he, as well as other members, are adamant that the Club is not “bougie” or “elitist.” Yet the symbolic boundaries embedded within the process of joining the Club create a tension between maintaining exclusivity and fostering group membership.

Remarkably similar to the procedures of social clubs outlined by Drake and Cayton (1945), very rigid guidelines used to maintain the Founders Club’s exclusivity. Up until the 1950s, prospective members could only get into the Club if they received a unanimous vote. Thus, only one “blackball” sealed a prospective member’s fate. In addition, the Club limited membership to twenty-five persons. However, the standards grew more lenient around mid-century, beginning with a push to increase maximum membership to thirty-five. Although the club voted to approve this resolution, according to Harold, a 60-year-old retired engineer, some members “voted no on every

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5 The term “blackball” was used by members of clubs in Black Metropolis to describe the selectivity they exercised in choosing candidates for membership. Founders also commonly use the term when describing the process of getting into the Club.
[prospective] member that was brought to the Club” to prevent anyone else from joining. This behavior caused another change to the Club’s charter. Now a prospective member can still get into the Club if he receives two blackballs, but no more than two.

The original charter’s membership limit and unanimity standard provided the Club with much leverage in determining, or perhaps more accurately, circumscribing who could become a member. Quincy, a systems engineer and one of the youngest members, noted that the founders of the organization wanted to keep “membership tight” and “very exclusive.” He reasons that this stemmed from a desire for the Club to be “a beacon for, you know, men of color in doing things with their lives.”

While membership restrictions have slackened, the Club is still selective in determining who can become members. As in the past, the only way to get in to the Club is through “member invitation” or “sponsorship.” This requires having some type of acquaintance or friend who is already a member that will extend the invite and sponsor the prospective member. However, simply knowing someone in the Club is not grounds for membership. Becoming a member is really an informal process of gaining familiarity with the Club and its membership. Before actually joining the Club individuals often cultivate relationships over several years by attending formal and informal gatherings. It is a bi-directional learning process, giving prospective members the opportunity to learn more about the Club and current members the chance to learn more about the prospective member’s background. The latter is key because only individuals who become known to the membership base and express a desire to join by spending time at the Club will be
able to avoid three blackballs. Thus, by the time a prospective member comes up for a vote the procedure should be a mere formality.

Selectivity is embedded in the informal familiarity-generating process. Members use the casual encounters to determine if “the prospective new guy is gonna be a good fit.” In other words, if members sense a mismatch between the Club’s informal criteria and the individual’s values or reasons for wanting to join the chances of getting into the Club will be hindered. At the same time, though, individuals have become members only to realize that they “don’t mesh” with the Club. What, then, does it mean to be a “good fit?”

Most basically, sharing similar hobbies and interests, such as enjoying watching football, not being “too quiet,” and being able to take a joke, is important to conveying one’s fit to members. There is an expectation that one will come to the Club and fellowship with their peers, thus demonstrating the value they place on the social intercourse enabled by the organization. The personality traits identified by members, nevertheless, extend beyond commonalities based in leisure.

Members make sure to note that the Club does not discriminate based on educational level or occupational prestige. Many of the characteristics noted by members, nonetheless, invoke reputable standards and indicate selectivity. 35-year-old Simon explicitly stated that the Club is not interested in “anybody that may have a bad reputation.” Rather, it looks for “[s]omebody that has integrity.” In terms of the specific attributes or values individuals are sought to possess, family life and employment are important indicators of one’s integrity and reliability. Peter, a 60-year-old used car
salesman and former pro football player, emphasized that the Club does not limit its membership to the “upper echelon” but includes people from “all walks of life.”

However, when considering prospective members, he looks for guys with “a good job situation” and “a good family life.” As he struggled to sum up what the Club looks for in prospective members Peter settled on “stability,” connecting it to the Club’s financial obligations and his emphasis on family.

You know we got dues we have to pay… I look for a guy that is taking care of his family, I think that's huge to me. He's not willing to take care of his own family then how can he take care of a family or group of guys. That to me is like a family. Our club is a membership club. It's like a group of guys that are really close and bonded. So you've got to be able to if I see where he can't take care of his own family then I feel like he's not a fit for our club. In my opinion.

Peter’s comments illustrate the connection between the Club’s exclusivity and organizational survival. Without a financially secure membership base the Club would not have been able to sustain itself as long as it has.

72-year-old Benjamin, the longest-standing active member, also highlights the need for stability, while explicitly stating how it reflects on Black men’s reputation overall.

…you’ve got to get the right kind of guys that are willing to put their hands in their pocket to pay their dues… You got to pay when it’s time to pay. In other words, you’ve got to have an occupation, a job, that’s at the level that will allow you to do this kind of thing. And uh, you know, keep your family going and your kids going in the right direction you know… African American men catch a lot of hell in the general public in terms of not taking care of their children. And committing crimes and taking dope and all that. And I know, but that’s not what we have here. You know. Guys from time to time do things they shouldn’t do. But we’re not what America thinks of African American men…
Benjamin’s points correspond with Peter’s in noting the relationship between members’ employment and organizational efficacy. He stressed at several points during the interview that Founders are “financial” and this has enabled the group to maintain a clubhouse for so many years. In other words, members of the Club must possess the resources necessary to support the organization fiscally. However, Benjamin’s remarks are also imbued with politics of respectability. He admits that Founders are “not God’s gift to the world either,” but members’ dedication to family and work serve as counterpoints to stereotypical images of Black men. As a result, Benjamin has “always been proud to be a Founder.” Thus, exclusionary dynamics within the Club yield positive emotional outcomes as the following sections detail.
The Meaning of Fellowship

The Founders Club remains first and foremost a social club where fellowship is key. Members recognize the significance of fellowship in regards to the founding of the organization and its mission. They also acknowledge fellowship as one of the best attributes of the Club. Harold referred to fellowship as the “founding principle” and “the best quality” of the Club. Harold sees the fellowship and “camaraderie” that comes with being a member of the Founders Club as “a tremendous value.”

The private and racial dynamics of the Club afford fellowship a particularly important meaning. Quincy describes the Club as “like a second family” and also feels that the best quality of the Club is its members. However, for Quincy, it is not just the individual members and the relationships that matter, but also the unique cultural character of the organization. While Quincy appreciates the inviting atmosphere of the Club, he noted that “there are just not a lot of places you can go to like this where it’s, you know, just men of color.” The Founders Club provides Quincy with a space to socialize with fellow African American men exclusively and develop camaraderie.

The racially homogenous character of this space is especially important for these men because it provides a venue where they can act and talk without feeling vulnerable to the scrutiny of whites. William, a 41-year-old and member since 2007 who works in a white-collar position, described the club as “the place where you can just let your hair
down.” He identified trust as the primary factor influencing his ability to feel comfortable and be himself. However, he acknowledged the significance of the Club being all-Black.

...the only thing that happens that separates this club being, at this particular point in time, we've always been an all-Black club...you take the racial element out, like I said, so you're not thinking about that next person judging on race. So that gives you some comfort...

The “racial element,” then, provides additional socioemotional security for William in the club’s setting, knowing that any judgment within the Club will not have race-based undertones.

Similarly, 39-year-old member Malcolm discussed how race plays a crucial role in shaping social interaction within the Club. However, unlike William, Malcolm recognizes race, rather than trust, as the primary mechanism allowing members to let their guard down. Malcolm works as a college admissions counselor while also earning his PhD in higher education. He grew up in a predominantly Black neighborhood and went to predominantly Black schools, including a historically Black college. When Malcolm arrived at graduate school to pursue his advanced degree he was surprised to find himself in the minority. He continues to be surrounded mostly by whites through his work in higher education administration. Malcolm used the metaphor of “the mask” when discussing why members do not talk about their professional, and in some cases, altruistic activities and accomplishments in the Club.

Because you wear that mask all day. You know you wear that professional, "I'm on" mask all day. Founders is the place you come to be you. Whoever you is, you know.

At the same time Malcolm sees the Club as a place where he can talk about divisive issues, including politics and religion, as well as what may seem like less polarizing
topics, but ones that are culturally contingent, such as wanting to eat chitterlings on Thanksgiving despite their connection to slavery.

You know it's you can't have those conversations openly in a lot of environments...Like we show up, put this mask on to pretend to be somebody else to get through the work day. And in contemporary language we call it code switching. You know, you just move in and out of these different personalities just to get through the day.

Malcolm’s reference to Anderson’s concept of code switching and how he relates it to wearing the mask reveals how the Black elite manage their identities depending on racial contexts. In fact, Anderson (2004) asserts that Black executives use code switching to resolve their ambiguous position within the corporate work setting. “Depending on the issue and the audience at hand,” Anderson states, “they might behave in a racially particularistic manner in private, while embracing more mainstream behavior in public” (p. 433). The Club, then, is a private place where members can reveal their true identities without being encumbered by the mask.

The code switching behavior is evident in the comments made by Benjamin who was also a member of a private social club in the downtown area, which at one time discriminated against Blacks, for eighteen years before resigning a few months ago following his retirement. When asked why Black men today still seek to join the Founders when they have access to integrated institutions like the private club downtown, Benjamin noted “they like to have it be Black.” After prompting Benjamin to explain what he meant by this he discussed how he talked about the same topics with his friends at the downtown private club, but “didn’t add the color to it.” Benjamin described how the response to the antics of one Buck would differ based on the context.
Big, loud Owen. I mean Owen say, ahhhh! Yeah, yeah, yeah. Down here we say, Owen, shut your goddamn mouth [we both laugh]. Down there [the downtown club] I say [in a reserved, low-tone voice], Owen, geewaahee, guy’s loud isn’t he [laughs]. You know, [laughs], down here we say [in a much more animated voice], you Black motherfucker, shut up!...You know, it’s a different culture you know [laughing]. It’s funny but it’s the truth. And, it’s a different relaxation.

The difference in Benjamin’s response extends beyond word choice in his hypothetical situation. In addition to more formal verbiage in the downtown club setting, he specifically demonstrates how he would behave more reserved, lowering his voice perhaps to imitate the speech of his white friends or at the very least conform to their expectations of normative behavior. He removes the conversational color that he would use freely within the Founders Club and indicates that this impacts the types of relaxation furnished by each setting. Benjamin’s comments, as well as those of Malcolm and William, illustrate how the Club provides a safe space to engage in emotionally unconstrained intercourse. Among fellow Black men, the members do not feel the need to subdue their behavior and true feelings and/or avoid certain discussions.
Counteracting Seclusion and Affirming Racial Pride

Feeling that one is the *only* successful Black man in a social milieu brings a feeling of isolation. Like women in the corporate world (Kanter, 1977), many Black elites experience tokenism within their work settings (Anderson, 2004; Benjamin, 1991). This is consequential as it may lead to additional pressures and stresses (Jackson and Stewart, 2003) and contribute to negative emotions due to feeling ostracized (Graham, 1995). Thus, beyond actively seeking ways to maintain intraracial ties in other domains (Lacy, 2007), the Black elite use these opportunities to counteract feelings of seclusion and reaffirm racial pride.

Gary also described the Club as a place where you can “be yourself” and “surround yourself with guys you have things in common with, guys who, you know, look like you.” Unlike the workplace, there are no “expectations” at the club in terms of “acting a certain way.” The club provides a space where members can do what they choose, whether that is do work or relax and have a drink. However, the makeup of the Club’s membership provides an additional function for Black men like Gary in high-level positions. Gary spoke about the isolation he experiences at his job, saying he’s “been the first and the only many times in my career.” The Club serves an important role in offsetting this feeling of racial seclusion.

But there's, there comes a time when, you know, it's kind of refreshing to, you know, get to a place where you say, wow, I'm not the only one...I was
in my office eight hours today…I don't know how many meetings I had. There was not a single meeting I walked into, today, where I didn't have the feeling that I'm the only one.

However, the isolation that Gary experiences at work is not limited to race. There is also a gender dynamic undermining his sense of belonging.

And it's not just the only one because of my race. Part of it is. But, the only one in my position, the only one at my level. Yes, the only one of my race in most of the meetings I was in…in all of my meetings today…I did not sit and engage with one single African American male. In all my meetings today. An African-American female in one of my meetings. I did not sit and engage with, not one African American male between the hours of 8 o'clock and 4 o'clock when I got ready to leave to come down here to meet with you. So why wouldn't I want to come and spend a little time, here, with a group of brothers who all look like me, who all are as equally intelligent, equally contributing, and equally accomplished personally and professionally as I am? When I go through my whole day and didn't interact with a single person that looked like me or have in common the things that I have in common. That's, that's a real perk for this club.

As Gary’s comments illustrate, his executive position places him in a setting where interaction with other African Americans, and in particular, other Black men, is hard to come by. The Club provides an outlet where Gary is not only able to engage with people who “look like” him, but also interact with people who think, act, and have achieved similar levels of success as him. Due to the pedigree of past and current membership he need not worry about being the first or the only, and for Gary, “that’s reassuring to know.”

Like Gary, Malcolm’s administrative position in academia and simultaneous standing as a PhD student puts him in contact mostly with whites. Malcolm put somewhat of a twist on the Club’s motto when explaining the purpose of the organization, noting the centrality of the sense of belonging the Club affords its members.
To bring together like-minded individuals in a safe and supportive space. You know when you're, *it's lonely at the top*. You know it's, when you truly experience a form of success, however you define success, you often find yourself standing there alone. But you're surrounded by people who've all experienced the same thing. So that provides camaraderie to all of you. So that's the purpose of the Founders Club.

When asked what it means to be a Founder, Malcolm immediately said “pride.” William also noted that Club’s all-Black composition imbues “a sense of pride.” The pride members describe not only stems from their racial solidarity, but is also intertwined with the esteem provided by members’ socioeconomic attainment. These men seek out others like them to reaffirm their status positions as not only Black men, but as *successful Black* men.

The gratification that members get out of being a part of the organization and their emphasis on its legacy became immediately apparent during my first field visit. The Club held a fish fry, open to the public, in late September of 2016. A friend and I went to the club, a small, brick building sitting on the periphery of a large parking lot. Two tents were set up outside in the Club’s parking lot where a few members were preparing the food under the tents. Motown music was playing. After getting our food, we went inside the club and sat at a round, card playing table on the far side of the room. We sat next to Vivian, the wife of Damian, a 64-year-old member since 1996. He soon joined us at the table. As we ate our food Damian began giving us some details about the organization, including its history and the number of members. In addition, Damian discussed the pedigree of the Club’s membership, past and present.

This club has included some of the most prominent Black professionals of the community of Langston. The first Black principal of a school in a
Langston school district. The judge who desegregated Langston school districts.

He noted that today the membership still consists of various prominent professionals, including an attorney, a family doctor, and corporate executives. For himself, Damian recently retired after owning a Farmers’ Insurance agency for 27 years and currently serves as a construction consultant. The Founders are profoundly appreciative of their institutional legacy, espousing intense admiration for the accomplishments of their predecessors.

The positive emotionality that comes with being a Founder is perhaps best described by Owen, a 44-year-old who has been a member for six years and works as a relationship manager. Owen acknowledges that “you can get fellowship in a lot of places,” but what he experiences at the Founders is unique.

...if I can use any word outside of brotherhood I mean, let me just say I can walk in here and I can feel the love. I don't have to see it. I can feel the love. I can feel it. And no one has to be in the club if I walk in. If I walk in the club I can feel it. It's kind of sacred.

Owen’s comments illustrate how the bonds among this group of elite Black men are deeply affectual. In addition, they convey the nuance of emotional processes in the organizational dynamics of the Founders Club as well as the particularities of racialized emotions. Being in the Club not only makes race less prevalent due to being surrounded by others who “look like you,” but it also reaffirms racial pride and solidarity.
Discussion

Affronted by attacks on their dignity, charter members of the Founders Club engaged in intraracial demarcation, using strict guidelines to distinguish between “themselves” and “others” as they sought to prove their self-worth in counteracting stigmatization (Lamont et al., 2016). Today, Founders continue to engage in boundary work through both objective and symbolic mechanisms.

The costs associated with membership, the clubhouse, and other physical barriers tied to the Club’s property combine to limit accessibility and thus serve as social boundaries. Most significantly, the hedges illustrate the interplay between social and symbolic boundaries. In terms of their boundary properties, the hedges are permeable and salient (Pachucki et al., 2007) as they are easily penetrable yet elicit deference from outsiders. Members, too, recognize the physical barrier, but what they see as outsiders’ attempts to penetrate it make the need to reify and reconstruct its symbolism apparent. The reinstallation of the fence will not physically inhibit passersby from asking if they can join in the Club’s activities, or at the very least, partake in some food, but it may more firmly signify their status as outsiders, and in the eyes of members, enhance the salience of the boundary and diminish its permeability. The presence of luxury cars creates a “bougie” aura about the Club and its membership base and potentially shapes how community residents view the organization in relation to themselves. Therefore, the
class-informed racial identities of Founders are indirectly constructed within the community through publicly visible status symbols.

Symbolic boundaries are also embedded in the process of becoming a member of the organization. The Club’s standards have grown less restrictive over the years, but it still upholds a certain level of selectivity. Members must become acquainted with prospective members, building familiarity and trust before accepting them into the Club. Being a “good fit” is also necessary for entry and encompasses reputable values such as employment and familiar stability. By highlighting these values the Club is not only distinguishing themselves from Black male stereotypes, but reconstructing the Black male identity more generally.

There is a tension, however, in negotiating exclusion and inclusion within the organization and among the Black elite more generally. According to Lamont and Fleming (2005, p. 37), while the Black elite seeks group solidarity, by “anchoring their own cultural membership in their capacity to achieve by the standards of American individualism…Black elites risk reinforcing boundaries that put the African American working class and poor outside the bounds of ‘people like us.’” Consequently, Lamont and Fleming assert that the strategies used by the Black elite “to combat racial stigma could have contradictory and dysfunctional effects.” (p. 40) In terms of the Founders Club, members insist that the organization is not elitist regardless of what meaning status symbols convey to the community and the standards used when evaluating prospective members. Why, then, does the organization feel the need to maintain exclusivity yet emphasize inclusion?
Firstly, there is a certain practicality and utility to the boundary work embedded within the organization, reflecting how institutions both contextualize and constrain ethnoracial boundary work (Pachucki et al., 2007). With greater access to integrated institutions Black social organizations like the Founders must carefully balance how much exclusivity they can maintain without endangering organizational survival. Too much exclusivity may make the Club appear snobby and thus diminish its attractiveness as an organization. More importantly, though, being too selective would limit the pool of eligible applicants. The Club will have much difficulty maintaining the operations of the clubhouse without members who are able to meet financial obligations and are committed to the organization. Thus, employment and familial standards are integral to organizational sustenance.

Secondly, and intangibly more important, boundary-making processes contribute to a sense of classed-based racial belonging. Despite their achieved socioeconomic position, the master status of race continues to be the defining factor shaping the Black elite’s interactions with whites and their sense of belonging. The fear of racially-charged judgment and the perception and/or encounters with discrimination can contribute to negative emotions such as rage (Cose, 1995) and rejection (Jackson and Stewart, 2003). The Black elite may feel the need to engage in emotional deference (Wilkins and Pace, 2014), subordinating their true feelings in favor of those conforming to white expectations, to avoid being seen as a “Race man” or a Race woman,” (Anderson, 2004) or African Americans preoccupied with and/or willing to speak out on racial issues. Race places the Black elite on the periphery of the deference system, thus they are highly
aware of its boundary lines (Shils, 1969) as well as the emotional reactions which may inhibit their ability to be accepted by similarly-positioned whites in their social world.

The Club provides a racially homogenous safe space where the members have the capacity to act as they want without the worry of being judged. Benjamin (1991) finds that in their workplaces Black elite feel the need to “wear the mask,” not revealing their true selves to their white colleagues and suppressing their attitudes, behaviors, and emotions. Members expressed this sentiment when describing the Club as a place where one can “be yourself” and tied it to the Club’s racial homogeneity. They do not have to concern themselves with race watching because the Club takes out the “racial element,” providing members a sense of ease, and acts as an “emotional shield” (Wilkins and Pace, 2014) enabling these men to behave emotionally unconstrained.

Nevertheless, Lacy (2007, pp. 126-127) is correct in conceptualizing these Black spaces as more than places of temporary refuge but rather venues “where they are free to simply enjoy interacting with other Blacks.” The sense of brotherhood, camaraderie, and fellowship Founders emphasize and value reflect the role of affect in members’ desire to participate in the organization. There is particular nuance to the emotional processes in the organizational dynamics of the Founders Club as well as the particularities of racialized emotions and group cohesion. The racial pride and solidarity instilled in the organization goes beyond being surrounded by others who “look like you,” but also, as stated by Gary, those “who all are as equally intelligent, equally contributing, and equally accomplished personally and professionally.” The Founders are profoundly appreciative of their institutional legacy, espousing intense admiration for the accomplishments of
their predecessors. The success of and camaraderie with fellow contemporary members instills pride and a sense of belonging, reminding them that while it may often feel “lonely at the top,” they are certainly not alone.

To extend beyond Lacy’s theory of strategic assimilation, then, the Founders Club embodies intraracial collective assimilation. Whereas Lacy’s concept posits that the Black elite seek integration to affirm their middle-class status as well as Black spaces in order to construct and nurture their racial identities, through intraracial collective assimilation the Black elite reify class- and race-based identities in an intimate, within-group setting. Through social organizations like the Founders Club the Black elite collectively affirm class-informed racial identities yielding solidarity and emotional strength. In this racially homogenous safe space Founders can positively reinforce their racial selves by acting emotionally unconstrained and counteracting feelings of seclusion as they celebrate and support the accomplishments of their members, past and present.

Thus, while the boundaries erected by the Black elite may prove dysfunctional in terms of creating an all-encompassing form of group solidarity and reproduce intraracial inequality, there is a certain functionality to the boundary-making processes employed by the Founders Club. Exclusion helps sustain the organization by ensuring members have the commitment and financial security to meet organizational obligations. Furthermore, affirmation of class-informed racial identities and group membership provides a source of emotional strength for this group of elite African American men as they counteract stigmas associated with Black males broadly. The Founders Club, therefore, walks the
intraracial tightrope, carefully negotiating exclusion and inclusion as it seeks to endure in an era where integration threatens its existence.
Conclusion

The Black elite have surely made gains following the civil rights movement, representing the subgroup of African Americans that have benefitted the most from increasingly accessible educational, employment, and housing opportunities. The repercussions of such intraracial social distinctions are nevertheless consequential for inequality, especially as advantaged segments of the Black population continue to make gains and create greater distance between themselves and their disadvantaged counterparts (Lacy, 2015; Wilson 1980).

However, for upwardly mobile Blacks, socioeconomic attainment certainly does not mean that they do not experience racism. The status of race often trumps class position, making the Black elite vulnerable to discrimination no matter how high up the economic ladder they climb. In fact, their exposure to racism may be heightened due to their immersion in predominantly white settings both at work and in their communities. This can produce a feeling of isolation and negative emotional outcomes intricately tied to race. In order to counteract seclusion and feeling race negatively, the Black elite seek intraracial ties to compensate for their isolation. In doing so, they are also able to release the veil and experience joy.

In exploring how a contemporary elite African American men’s social club negotiates the tensions of exclusion and inclusion, this paper bridges previous work on
African American social organizations and their boundary functions (Du Bois, 1899; Drake and Cayton, 1945) with contemporary research showing the continuing prevalence of intraracial demarcation among the Black elite in the public arena (Anderson, 2012; Lacy, 2007; Lamont and Fleming, 2005; Pattillo, 2007) and other institutional settings (Banks, 2010, 2016). Boundary work remains relevant to the social organizational life of the Black elite as they continue to contest stigmatization and reconstruct racial identities informed by status distinctions within their private social spaces. However, with access to greater opportunities in the post-Civil Rights era Black elite social organizations must carefully manage its boundary-making processes to ensure organizational sustenance. At the same time, an interplay between exclusion and inclusion manifests as class-informed racially homogenous safe spaces breed a sense of belonging instilled with racial pride.

The exclusive nature of the Founders Club is certainly not unique in the context of African American social organizations historically. Race-making has been central to the organizational life of Black elite as they simultaneously strove towards social acceptance and social status affirmation by respectively uplifting the race through adherence to standards of respectability and differentiating themselves from lower-class Blacks. Participation in social organizations became a primary means for accomplishing this task.

The Founders Club, nonetheless, provides an example of how African American social organizations are still highly important in creating social cohesion among Black elites. The small community of fellowship provides a safe space where members can develop bonds with other Black men of similar social standing and express their emotions without feeling constrained. Outside the purview of white judgment Founders are able to
remove the veil and be themselves. In addition, the Club instills a sense of racial pride as members are reminded of their predecessors’ prominence and the accomplishments of contemporary members. The founding principal of fellowship remains integral to the Founders Club today and highlights the persisting role of affect and socioemotional support in African Americans’ participation in voluntary organizations.

I propose the theory of intraracial collective assimilation to extend on Lacy’s (2007) work and tease out the exclusionary and inclusionary dynamics embedded in the social organizational life of the Black elite. Through participation in these organizations they are able to affirm class- and race-based identities, collectively engaging in intraracial demarcation and building camaraderie based on the achievements of current and past members. This produces emotional strength in the face of the intraracial isolation Black elites face in other contexts of their lives and mediates the tensions arising from drawing within-group boundaries. The collective element reflects the communal resilience that African Americans have historically relied upon against racism.

Foundational inquiries into exclusion and inclusion in the formation of social groups (Durkheim, 2001; Simmel 1978) remain central to contemporary sociological research (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Pachucki et al. 2007). Social group formation is inherently informed by contestation as collectivities use demarcation as the basis for solidarity. Navigating the tensions of exclusion and inclusion is especially complicated for marginalized groups proximate to the social core as they combat stigmatization while pursuing social integration. The Black elite is one of many such groups engaging this balancing act and the processes shaping their construction of groupness reflect how
boundary work emerges in consideration of various factors including sociohistorical and socioeconomic circumstances, institutional elements, and cultural repertoires (Lamont et al. 2016). Furthermore, the case of the Black elite highlights the socioemotional mechanisms underlying identity affirmation and a sense of belonging where social isolation is pertinent.

Centered in a long-term, historically grounded dialogue on racial exclusion (Du Bois 1899; Drake and Cayton, 1945), this study illustrates the utility of applying critical insights from research on boundary work (Lacy 2007; Lamont 1992, 2000; Lamont et al. 2016) to Frazier’s (1957) unresolved questions regarding the Black elite’s ambiguous social status and the frustrations associated with their immersion in an unwelcoming white world. Negotiating the tensions of producing social solidarity in response to exclusion is nevertheless salient to an array of marginalized groups, and their unique circumstances likely constrain available boundary-making processes in specific ways. How these groups navigate their own intersectional tightropes relative to their distinct social statues must continue to be interrogated. The case of the Black elite provides a lens through which scholars can examine how these groups balance the tensions of exclusion and inclusion within an unequal social landscape.
Bibliography


