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“Let’s Stay Together: Racial Separation and Other Coping Strategies Among African American High School Students Attending Predominately White Schools.”

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Abstract

In this study, I explore what I call “coping strategies”—assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization—used by minority students who are in predominately White schools. Rather than being understood individually, I show in this study that these strategies are better understood as a social matrix. Depending upon the context, the majority of the minority student population will use more than one of these strategies at any given time. Further, we might gain a better understanding of micro-level race interactions if we can begin to map context. Are there times when minorities are more likely to engage in “separation” than other times? Why? Is there one strategy that seems to be more appealing overall, or are all tools equally useful?

The main goals of this study are fivefold: 1) to depart from binary models which treat the four coping strategies I have identified—assimilation, integration (or cultural "straddling" to paraphrase Carter 2005) marginalization, and separation as if they are mutually exclusive. I want to uncover how they are all constantly being used and begin mapping the process of when they are used: 2) to engage and challenge the two prevailing theories about "acting White." I will challenge Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) "acting White" hypothesis which links low achievement to Black students who do not do well in school for fear of being labeled "White." In addition I will engage Carter's (2005) hypothesis that "acting White" is linked to social behaviors not academic ones: 3) To engage Tatum's (1999) supposition that "all the Black Children are sitting together in the cafeteria" and add a sociological perspective to her psychological approach: 4) To begin mapping the process and context in which students become "cultural straddlers" (Carter 2005): 5) To examine potential gendered differences in how the coping strategies are enacted.
If we do all these things; a) we can begin to map the contextual nature of collective racial identity, b) we can unlock how students successfully negotiate race, collective identity, and school success, c) we can chart a course that will allow us to better understand how we can create inclusive environments that allow students to be academically (or professionally) successful and stay culturally rooted.
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INTRODUCTION

Many years ago when I was a student at an elite, private high school, I remember walking home in my school uniform being teased by a group of public school students. When I tried to defend myself, the sound of "proper" English flowing from my mouth added insult to injury and the taunts escalated. No longer were they questioning my uniform, which seemed to them to be nothing more than a bizarre fashion choice, they began questioning my identity; "Who is this wannabe White girl?" "Do you like Oreos, 'cause you are one!" and on and on.

What was even more bizarre to me is that earlier that same day, in a history class—after having a spirited debate with a young conservative over the legacy of Malcolm X- I had been labeled a "Black radical." When news of our debate spread throughout the school, some of the White students were averting their eyes and mumbling (I assume about me) as I passed them in the hallway. Yet I was heralded as a hero at the all-Black lunch table. So here I was--the same person on the same day an "Oreo" (a slang term for a Black person who "acts White") to one group, a Malcolm X style, militant, Black person to another group and a girl who had the courage to "represent"(i.e. be a role model for the race) to a third group. How on earth could all of these things be true?

In retrospect, I can understand why the public school students thought I was assimilating—I was assimilating to wearing the school uniform and speaking "proper English" and this was the only context they had to judge me. I am slightly less understanding about being labeled a Black militant. I will concede that it is a risk you run if you defend Malcolm X and then sit at an all Black lunch table, however, that was only one context in a long school day which also included plenty of integrated moments.
This experience began my quest to try to understand the complications and contradictions of identity—specifically racial identity. For the record, I consider myself neither an assimilationist (Oreo) nor a militant separatist. In truth I was/am both of these things and neither of these things depending upon the context. How can these apparent contradictions of color blind racial assimilation on one hand, and racially conscious separatism on the other-- square with one another? This is the central question this study will illuminate.

Race has been well documented as a social construction with an enduring legacy that has both social and political consequences. While the macro-level differences between Blacks and Whites have been studied extensively (Omi & Winant 1994, Feagin & Sikes 1995), less well known are the micro-level interactions in which racial boundaries are formed, reformed, and contested. Further, the study of micro-level racial interactions has tended to be grounded in psychological research (Brown 1999, Grantham & Ford 2003, Tatum, 1999). While the study of psychological processes has yielded important information about how individuals value their race or ethnicity, little is known about how these individualized mechanisms are utilized at a collective level. Specifically, what knowledge can be gleaned about racial boundaries—(racial divisions based on phenotypical and social differences) by utilizing sociology rather than psychology to examine racial interactions that occur at the micro-level?

Schools are one of the most important sites to study if we are to gain an understanding of how racial interaction is shaped. Schools are important not only because they perform the function of education but also because they are key to how children and young adults become socialized. Education is often perceived as race-neutral but in actual practice schools are one of the primary locations in which racial identity is constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed
(Fordham 1991, Proweller 1999, Tatum 1999, Carter 2005, Lewis 2005). Schools themselves become an intervening factor between the students and the larger racial caste system. Yet, many sociological studies of school and race are focused upon understanding larger institutionalized educational inequalities like “the achievement gap” (Fordham 1996) rather than on how schools themselves reproduce, camouflage or maintain a racial order (Proweller 1999). Examining widely accepted theories like the achievement gap at the macro level may obscure relevant nuances about how race is negotiated in everyday life and how the negation of "everyday race-making" (Lewis, 2003) may mitigate the achievement gap itself. While education is certainly the most important function of a school, socialization is arguably a close second. Students are expected to socialize with their peers in any number of activities from the classroom, to sports, to social clubs to everything in between. School activities are often perceived as being "race neutral" yet it is unclear what (if any) kind of role race may play in the selection and participation of Black students in school activities. Little is known about how students negotiate the social world of school or how being labeled Black (by others and/or self) may influence their social decisions either by removing options (such as being purposefully excluded or not being included) or creating other options (such as a separate Black social world).

It can be a difficult for Black students, particularly those attending predominately White schools, to find the balance between expressing racial and cultural solidarity with one another which runs the risk of them being labeled "separatists" and integrating or assimilating so much with Whites that are labeled "Oreos" or "sell outs" by other Blacks. Sociological theory has tried in vain to reconcile two disparate views of the consequences of pluralism — One school of thought recognizes the need for minorities to have self-organized groups to give them a system of support separate from White racism (Barron 1975, Tatum 1999, Feagin 1996). The other
school of thought maintains that “cross cutting memberships” are necessary to prevent the minority and the majority groups from becoming completely polarized (Barron 1975, Buttny 1999). Generally, studies about race and schools tend to be grounded in one or the other of these perspectives. This division, however, does not allow for the possibility that the practice of integration or segregation can be more fluid, that is, not mutually exclusive. Either can be used as a “coping strategy” depending upon the situation.

Though race continues to be "an American dilemma" (Myrdal 1944) surprisingly little is known about how African-American teenagers negotiate the process of racial identity. Although there have been some studies of “everyday race-making” (Lewis 2003), these studies have usually focused on young elementary school aged children rather than on older adolescents. Given what we know about the teenage period, it is likely that the process of everyday race-making takes on a different character in the high school years because teenagers have more agency than younger children but also experience more pressure to conform to their peers than adults. Also peers have been found to be one of the most influential groups in the lives of most teenagers. This phenomenon is particularly apparent in the psychological literature which posits that peer pressure is one of the most influential factors in how teens choose to make decisions (Palladino 1996, Tatum 1999, Gaines 1998). Again while these studies have yielded important findings, they have been difficult to link back to sociology because sociologists tend to focus on more macro level issues. Therefore the link between race and interpersonal relations has yet to be fully illuminated in the field of sociology. For instance, one important but often neglected question in social science race research is; how does peer pressure become racialized (particularly if one belongs to a minority group)?
In this study, I explore what I call “coping strategies” used by minority students who are in predominately White schools. Most of the previous studies of the racial divide can be divided into one of the following four categories (Brown 1999): (1) Minorities in mostly white environments will (or should) assimilate (Brown 1999, Barron 1975); (2) Minorities in mostly White environments will (or should) separate (Anderson 1998, Brown 1999, Quillian & Campbell 2003, Taeuber & James 1982, Tatum 1999, Moody, 2001, Buttny, 1999, Fisher, Bradley & Hartman, 1995); (3) Minorities in mostly white environments become bi-cultural or integrated (Brown 1999, Quillian, & Campbell 2003, McPherson et al. 2001); (4) Minorities in mostly white environments become marginalized (Brown 1999, Phinney 1990, Feld & Carter, 1998, Proweller 1999). These categories are usually set up as binaries—meaning that researchers have typically treated the different outcomes of racial interaction-- assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization as if they are mutually exclusive. In addition, many researchers have shown more interest in how racial interactions affect individual outcomes than collective ones (Brown 1999, Tatum 1999).

I show in this study that these strategies are better understood as a social matrix. Depending upon the context, the majority of the minority student population will use more than one of these strategies at any given time. Further, we might gain a better understanding of micro-level race interactions if we can begin to map context. Are there times when minorities are more likely to engage in “separation” than other times? Why? Is there one strategy that seems to be more appealing overall, or all tools equally useful?
How do Whites respond to Black students? “In sight but out of mind”

More often than not racial separation between Blacks and Whites in today’s society happens not because Whites are *purposefully excluding* Blacks but because they are not *instrumentally including* them. This reflects a generational shift. In the civil rights era, a formalized system of segregation prevented social interaction between Blacks and Whites. Most did not attend the same schools, or live in the same neighborhoods or attend the same social functions. Now, even though the formal system of segregation is gone, schools (and neighborhoods) by and large still remain segregated (Massey & Denton 1998). Even when students attend desegregated schools, there is still not as much cross-racial interaction as the civil rights generation might have anticipated. Many studies have documented (and problematized) the fact that Black and White students, even in “integrated” classrooms appear to have little interaction with one another (Feagin & Sikes 1995) but the reasons behind this separation are still not well understood. Many have argued that the formal system of segregation has morphed into voluntary separation (Tatum 1999, Feagin & Sikes 1995) whereby both Blacks and Whites choose to interact in homogenous groups almost exclusively. But just how voluntary is this process? To ask it another way; if a country club that had a formal practice of excluding Blacks lifts the ban— but still no Blacks are invited to join, does not being included become tantamount to being excluded? Even if an invitation were extended, would it matter or work?

For the purpose of this study two well-known theoretical concepts may help to illuminate the acceptance of Blacks by Whites (or the lack thereof) across racial lines—*color blind racism* and *social closure*. Color blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003) asserts that discrimination takes place in less overt forms so that their racial character is often hidden just below the surface but
never stated. There are many different ways color blind racism can manifest itself, but probably the most common form, is “in sight but out of mind.” What I mean is that minorities, Blacks in particular, seem to occupy a social space that makes them both highly visible as a minority group but often invisible when it comes to “majority rules” decision making. For instance, the students at one of the schools in the study typically vote on whether to have a live band or a disc jockey for the school dances. Almost inevitably, the preference for either the live band or a DJ takes on a racial character—(with a majority of the White students preferring a live band and the majority of the Black students preferring a DJ). Because of majority rules decision making, the Black students' preference is consistently over-ruled which leads them to have little to no interest in attending the school dances. As this example illustrates, if Whites have majority status and make decisions according to their taste and interests (Proweller 1999), Blacks (or other minority groups) can become less likely to participate because they may feel as if their needs are not being met (Fischer, Bradley & Hartman 1995, Tatum 1999, Feld & Carter 1998). It may very well be that Whites are not trying to exclude Blacks. It's just that the idea that Black people's preferences might be different or should be accommodated is simply not factored into the equation. If Blacks (or other minorities) feel ignored for long enough they may seek out separate social spaces.

Another viable explanation of why Whites may or may not choose to interact with Blacks is Weber’s concept “social closure.” Whereas color blind ideology is largely unconscious, social closure is an active, often hostile response to dealing with differences. According to Parkin, social closure occurs when “social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles” (Parkin 1979, Lewis 2003, 285). In other words, Blacks may be marked as “out group” members who never receive the full
status of their white counterparts. If we conceive of colorblind ideology as “in sight but out of mind” social closure is actively “drawing a line in the sand.” An example of how social closure can play out in an elite environment would be the Skull and Bones society at Yale University, which is an elite "secret society" made of select members of Yale's already elite student body. Skull and Bones did not initially admit Blacks (until the 1950s) or women (until the 1990s) thereby restricting its access only to wealthy White males. This is an example of how race, class and gender can interact in powerful ways to facilitate social closure. Many studies have suggested that far from being passively “color blind,” Whites can and often do draw that line in the sand. In fact, sometimes White students are openly hostile to their Black counterparts—particularly in elite environments (Anderson 1998, Feagin & Sikes 1995, Frank 2002, Hemmons 1982, Proweller 1999). Some Whites not only downplay their hostility towards Blacks, they will blame Blacks for being hostile or exclusionary. Putting personal prejudices aside, analytically speaking race is an efficient way of deciding who is part of an “in–group” versus an “out-group.” Blacks because of phenotypical differences are easy marks for inclusion or exclusion. In addition, the racial legacy of this country translates into many negative stereotypes for Blacks that make many Whites leery of interacting with them. Being labeled Black is often enough to be determined as an out group member and therefore be denied solidarity with the dominant group. Conversely, being labeled Black can also provide an opportunity to build solidarity with others who share and must negotiate the same racial identification.

In addition some research has shown that one’s external label may in fact carry more meaning than one’s own self-identification. This concept is referred to as “imposed identity” (Brubaker & Cooper 2002, Lewis 2004). If, for instance, a biracial youth has the outward appearance of being Black, whether or not he/she self identifies as “Black” could take a back
seat to how others define him/her. As this example illustrates, racial classification is subject to both internal and external mechanisms. Past research has broadly addressed this topic (Lewis 2004) yet few studies have specifically asked how an imposed identity manifests itself in the everyday life of teenagers, particularly in a school setting. This is a central question my study addresses.

**When in Rome…** *The fine line between integrating versus assimilating as a coping strategy*

Assimilation into the American mainstream seems to make up part of the mythic American dream. For White immigrants, assimilating into a new American identity usually allowed them opportunities they did not have in their various homelands. However, while assimilation may have been a tenable goal for European immigrants, for many American Blacks, assimilation was neither possible nor desirable. In addition to the many institutionalized practices (such as segregation) that prevented Blacks from becoming a part of the “mainstream”, there is a Black cultural ethos that equates assimilation to “committing racial suicide” (Marable 2002, 178). For many Blacks, the American dream has been based more on Dr. King’s vision of an integrated society- a society in which Blacks and Whites can live together without their respective differences inhibiting their basic rights- than on the dominant ethos of assimilation— in which the dominant White culture subsumes the Black subculture. These divergent ways of thinking can cause misunderstandings between Blacks and Whites.

Often Blacks and Whites who speak of integration are not even using the term in the same way. Many Whites use the terms assimilation and integration interchangeably, as if they are synonyms, or if they do see these words as distinct, they use integration as a measure of how assimilated the Black population has become. Many Blacks, on the other hand, see assimilation
and integration as distinct. For most Blacks assimilation is an evil to be avoided. It means that you have lost your identity and become more like your oppressor than like a member of your own community (Collins 1989, Marable 2002). Assimilated Blacks are often seen as race traitors who care more about their individual success than the health and well-being of the Black community at large. Integration, on the other hand, is seen as the coming together of diverse groups who are treated as equals. It is desirable to the extent that Blacks can get the advantages of living around Whites such as better schools, more access to good hospitals, safer neighborhoods, etc… and yet can still be rooted in their own community and keep their distinct sense of culture (Patillo-McCoy 2000).

In essence, Black people’s efforts to hold on to a distinct Black culture is interpreted by many Whites as “rejection of the mainstream” or as hostility directed at Whites. In contrast, many Blacks feel that cultural affirmation is their best hope to avoid annihilation (which is how many Blacks view assimilation). There is some empirical evidence to support this claim. Drawing on the work of Blauner, Omi and Winant found that “Whites tend to locate racism in color-consciousness and find its absence in color-blindness. In doing so, they see the affirmation of difference and racial identity among racially defined minority students as racist. Non-white students, by contrast, see racism as a system of power, and correspondingly argue that Blacks, for example, cannot be racist because they lack power” (Omi & Winant 1994, 70). The difference in these viewpoints can cause Black and White students to talk past one another because each group has a different definition of the situation.

There appear to be two different perspectives at work for Blacks and Whites on the issue of racial consciousness. Whites have a tendency to see color-blindness as a virtuous ideal that all
people should strive for. In contrast Blacks have a tendency to see the affirmation of their cultural identity as virtuous and the denial of such as traitorous. Terms like "sell out," "Oreo," "Uncle Tom," and “acting white” are often used by Blacks to describe other Blacks that espouse a color blind ideology (Buttny 1999). This difference has the potential to put minority students that attend predominately White schools in an untenable position because it seems near impossible to embody both types of consciousness simultaneously. Some students may feel they must make a choice between extremes which can result either in separatist behavior with other Blacks, or assimilation into the dominant White culture—or at least the appearance of it (Fordham 1996). Other students however try to find ways “to straddle” these varied social worlds (Carter 2005, Tatum 1999). "Cultural straddlers," as Carter (2005) termed them, are "characterized by bicultural perspectives, they are the strategic movers across cultural spheres" (Carter 2005, 30). Carter's study found that cultural straddlers had more success academically and socially than their counterparts who chose either to separate or assimilate fully (Carter 2005, 43). Carter's work offers great insight into how students negotiate their racial/cultural identity. However, her central thesis is to address the shortfalls of Ogbu's "acting white" hypothesis in explaining the achievement gap, consequently she is less overtly concerned with how race affects other aspects of socialization.

Let’s stay together…the case for racial separation as a coping strategy

Much of the existing literature suggests that voluntary segregation is a strategy that minorities often use as a response to macro-level inequality (Anderson 1998, Feagin & Sikes 1995, Fisher & Hartmann 1995, Tatum 1999). Some social science research has found that a key factor in whether or not minorities will “self-segregate” is the percentage they make up of the
total population (Kanter 1977, Quillian & Campbell 2003). If a particular setting is almost balanced (between 30:70 and 50:50) minorities are more likely to build friendships and relationships based on propinquity—or common interests (Kanter 1977, Quillian & Campbell 2003). If however, they do not make up a significant number of the overall populace (a ratio of 20:80 or less) they are more likely to build relationships based upon homophily—or in this case same raced groupings (Quillian & Campbell 2003). In other words in populations where minorities are vastly outnumbered they are more likely to create a separate social world to meet their cultural needs.

Beverly Tatum, author of Why are all the Black Children Sitting Together in the Cafeteria (1997), applies this logic at the individual level. She argues that voluntary racial separation is an “important coping strategy.” For instance, she states: “One might wonder if this social connection is really necessary. If a young person has found a niche among a circle of White friends, is it really necessary to establish a Black peer group as a reference point? Eventually it is. As one's awareness of the daily challenges of living in a racist society increase, it is immensely helpful to be able to share one's experience with others who have lived it.” (Tatum 1997, 70) Tatum argues that racial identity is an important part of an individual’s psyche, particularly for a black youth who has to operate as a black person in society whether he/she likes it or not. Although actively organizing racial separation as a strategy to desegregate seems counterintuitive, Tatum believes that allowing the Black students to have an organized time together actually lessens the need for them to segregate themselves at other times. She argues; "It might seem counterintuitive that a school…could improve both academic performance and social relationships among students by separating the Black students for one period everyday but if we understand the unique challenges facing adolescents of color and the legitimate need they have to
feel supported in their identity development, it makes perfect sense” (Tatum 1997, 73-74).

Whereas Tatum takes a psychological approach to understanding this issue, I believe a sociological approach may provide a richer, more textured analysis that can shed some light on how this pattern of separation is developed and maintained. Sociological findings can help to illuminate how structural differences can lead to interpersonal choices. They can also shed light on how both structural and cultural forces interact with one another.

Many studies cite both institutional racism and social solidarity as reasons for racial separation (Feagin & Sikes 1995, Hill-Collins 2004, Tatum 1999). Patricia Hill-Collins has used the term “safe spaces” to describe the homophilous groups that minorities create in order to mitigate their minority status. Collins argues that in desegregated settings, “safe spaces” are key for minority students to provide not only solidarity but opportunities for mobilizing around issues of interest (Hill-Collins 2000, Tatum 1999, Giordano 2003). Relationships formed in safe spaces may be even more important for Black youth in predominately White settings. In addition to the regular pressures of adolescence, Black youth also have other pressures such as potential discrimination and learning how to infuse an ethnic identity with an individual identity (or the other way around).

The Black students in these environments are constantly negotiating their identities. At the heart of their negotiation is an explicit concern with race. On the one hand, their identity as Black people, (i.e. being physically and socially identifiable as Black), makes it easy for students to seek out others like themselves who occupy the same location in the social structure. This collective Black identity will at times override other aspects of identity. On the other hand, the idea of mobilizing around areas of interest (such as sports or social activities), may draw them
out of their Black niche and into other collectives, many of which are predominately White. This distinction is important because it reminds us that there are both push and pull factors that can either encourage or discourage racial separation. The desire to belong to a community or clique can reinforce racial separation and lead Black students to interact almost exclusively with one another or it can override it by encouraging students to prioritize other aspects of their identities. To me what is important is the fact that these outcomes are not mutually exclusive. A student could belong to both the Black clique and a sports team (even one with few or only one Black member). What is interesting is how do these negotiations occur and what do they reveal about race?

ACHEIVEMENT & ACTING WHITE—Is high achievement "acting White" or "acting right?" How does racial identity affect achievement?

Groups are defined as much by who does not belong as they are by who does belong. Skin color is the most obvious attribute that unites Black students and separates them from White students. However, there are other factors that mitigate how racial differences play out. Status is a key intervening variable—factors such as socioeconomic class, level of education, and achievement are all found to affect cross-racial friendships (McPherson et al. 2001, Hallinan & Teixeira 1987). Less is known about how these factors affect the intra racial friendship patterns of Black students. Achievement in particular is quite a contentious issue. There is evidence to suggest that while high achieving Blacks are more likely to be accepted by Whites (Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987), they are also more likely to be excluded by other Blacks (Fordham 1998).

Fordham & Ogbu (1986) argue that high-achieving Black students are shunned by their ethnic peers for “acting white.” While this theory has been widely accepted, it may not be as
broadly generalizable as previously believed. Some have suggested that Fordham & Ogbu’s theory falls short because they do not place their findings in a proper context (Perry 2004, Carter 2005, Fryer 2005). Perry argues that the “acting white” hypothesis does not take into account the historical importance of the African-American counter-narrative that knowledge was freedom…for (many important historical figures), education was how you claimed your humanity, struck a blow for freedom, worked for racial uplift, and prepared yourself for leadership” (Perry 2004, 25). Fryer (2005) argues that the link between acting white and achievement is most acutely felt in integrated public schools, and is virtually non-existent in both predominately Black public schools, and predominately White private schools. Carter’s (2006) study, attests that for students “acting white” is usually associated with the social and cultural behaviors—not academic ones.

The variation in these findings suggests that the picture is much more complex than we previously thought. Again, it points us in a direction to realize that collective identity may in fact be both a cause and an outcome of social solidarity. Because skin color is consistent no matter the context, the common experience of being Black may be enough to draw people together on the assumption of shared experiences. Yet, this assumption could potentially be problematic because cultural definitions of Blackness can vary widely. While being Black might initially draw people to others like themselves once a group begins to convene together and share values and experiences with one another, their shared racial identity can lead them to shared cultural values that may differ greatly from other people who have the same racial identity but a DIFFERENT set of shared cultural values. What this means is that the same behavior can be viewed either as “acting Black” or as “acting White” depending upon the context. This is how being labeled both Black and high achieving in one setting can lead people to view you as a
“soldier in the struggle” at one time (Fordham 1986) and in another setting can lead people to view you as a “sell out.” Both implicate one’s racial identity but they each express two very different interpretations of cultural meaning. Therefore, the type of school (public or private), the types of students, and whether or not the school environment is perceived as being hostile to either Black culture or Black students are all key intervening variables in determining the link between achievement and the perception of “acting White”.

MARGINALIZATION … How do potential bridge builders become outsiders?

Often the effort of trying to negotiate different populations and different cultural meanings can put one in a powerful position to act as a bridge builder between groups. "Straddlers" or integrators are in a better position to bridge the gap between various groups than either total separatists or complete assimilationists. However, sometimes occupying the spaces in between different groups can leave one vulnerable to being pushed to the fringes of all the groups in question (Brown 1999, Feld & Carter, 1998). What happens when loyalties are divided and/or sides need to be taken? Even if there is no outside pressure to take a side, carving out a niche in the middle is not a guarantee that you will belong to both (or all) groups in question. Sometimes this can lead one to be perceived as the perpetual outsider. Marginalization often occurs when people are not clear about where their loyalties lie. Usually marginalization is what happens when other coping strategies have failed. Although, sometimes (albeit rarely) students may attempt to marginalize themselves as a strategy to rebel against the conformist behavior of their peers (Gaines 1998). However, little is understood about how the racialization of peer pressure may cause students to become marginalized by various groups or opt out of group identity altogether by purposefully marginalizing themselves.
GENDER—Do young men and women cope differently?

Achievement/Status is not the only illuminating factor in determining how intra and cross racial friendships are formed. Gender is also an important consideration—particularly how race and gender interact with one another (Glenn 1999). There is some evidence to suggest that boys and girls may approach group boundaries differently. Drawing on the work of Maccoby (1998), MacPherson, Smith, Lovin and Cook (2001) found that boys had more heterogeneous friendships than girls because the nature of their play is less intimate and more activities based than that of girls. Not only were girls more homogenous in their friendship choices, but girls were more likely to solve potential conflicts by dropping friendships whereas boys were likely to deal with conflict by adding friendships (McPherson et. al 2001). This phenomenon has been observed in younger children but little is known about how teenagers negotiate this process or how race may also play a role.

Based on this finding, we would expect that the young men might have fewer boundaries and taboos about cross-racial interactions than the young women. We might anticipate that the less intimate (usually sports related) activities of boys and young men might present them with greater opportunities for friendships, especially across racial lines, than the young women in the study. We might also anticipate that the young women are most likely to be friends with other Black women. In addition, because the racial composition of the schools is far from balanced, I believe race will be more salient than gender in determining the friendship patterns of girls—meaning the girls will be more likely to form friendships with other Blacks across gender lines than they will be to form friendships with other women across racial lines.
The main goals of this study are fivefold: (1) To depart from binary models which treat the four coping strategies I have identified—assimilation, integration (or cultural "straddling" to paraphrase Carter 2005), marginalization, and separation as if they are mutually exclusive. I want to uncover how they are all constantly being used and begin mapping the process of when they are used. (2) To engage and challenge the two prevailing theories about "acting White." I will challenge Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) "acting White" hypothesis which links low achievement to Black students who do not do well in school for fear of being labeled "White." In addition I will examine Carter's (2005) hypothesis that "acting White" is linked to social behaviors not academic ones. (3) To scrutinize Tatum's (1999) supposition that "all the Black Children are sitting together in the cafeteria" and add a sociological perspective to her psychological approach. (4) To begin mapping the process and context in which students become "cultural straddlers" (Carter 2005). (5) To examine potential gendered differences in how the coping strategies are enacted. If we do all these things; a) we can begin to map the contextual nature of collective racial identity, b) we can unlock how students successfully negotiate race, collective identity, and school success, c) we can chart a course that will allow us to better understand how we can create inclusive environments that allow students to be academically (or professionally) successful and stay culturally rooted.

**METHODS**

The schools in this study are part of the independent school system in the Midwest. Independent schools are elite, college preparatory, private schools. Many have religious affiliations (usually Catholic like the schools in this study) but some do not. They are not however, to be confused with local Catholic schools. The independent schools operate outside of
the Arch Diocese. In fact they are generally known for their exclusive nature more so than their religious nature.

The elite nature of these schools means that certain questions that are usually the main focus for this kind of research are relegated to the background as givens. For instance, much has been made of the achievement gap between Black and White students. However, in schools like these where students must pass entrance exams to be accepted and can be expelled if they perform poorly academically, high achievement is expected of all students. Not achieving for any individual or group is frankly not an option. Also, in each of the schools, the Black population is around 10% or less, so completely separating from the White student majority is not an option either. Therefore, these schools were chosen in part because their very nature forces different answers than those we have begun to take for granted. These sites can provide us with important information about how the academic context forces minorities to negotiate their identities differently than in public school contexts.

Also, because the research gives reasons (albeit few--such as the boys being more willing to cultivate cross-racial friendships than girls which was highlighted at the outset of the paper) to assume that these issues affect boys and girls differently, it is important to examine potential gender differences. I specifically sought two single sexed schools and a co-ed school to allow for the illumination of this potential difference but admittedly this makes it potentially difficult to examine race over gender in friendships (p. 18).

All of the interviews took place between 2005-and 2006. In order to recruit students, flyers were posted at each of the campuses asking for Black students willing to participate in a study about their high school experiences. In schools that had Black student Unions or diversity
groups, I attended meetings and made a direct appeal to those in attendance. I also used a 
snowball technique to identify additional students who might be appropriate candidates for the 
study. I tried to recruit as many upperclassmen as possible because I believed the older students 
were more likely to have insights and experiences that are relevant to this project. However, 
because the African-American population at each school is so small, any student who 
volunteered had to suffice.

Also, including a single sexed male school in the sample allowed for a more even number 
of boys and girls than would have been possible otherwise because most of the co-educational 
schools tend to have a higher proportion of Black female students. I interviewed between four 
and five students from each of the three schools (14 interviewees altogether: 6 boys and 8 girls).

St. Zachary is an all-male private, (9-12) Catholic high school founded in 1831. It has a 
student population of about 1500. It sits on a sprawling campus which includes a 400 person 
chapel, an Olympic sized natatorium, a recently renovated football field, a 500 seat theater, a 
"south campus" which boats baseball and soccer fields, as well as a huge statue outside the 
entrance of the patron saint for whom the school is named. St. Zachary is located in Finneytown, 
a quaint suburb just north of the city of Cincinnati which at the time of the 2000 census was 70% 
White, 23% African American, and 7% "Other" and the median income of its inhabitants is 
$40,343.

St. Zachary High School has a selective entrance process. Students must take an entrance 
exam, submit an elementary school transcript, get teacher recommendations, and fill out an 
enrollment application. Other factors, such as legacy, and the High School Placement Test
(HSPT) are also factored into its admissions process. Only 45% of those who apply ultimately get accepted.

St. Zachary is considered a very competitive academic environment. It offers 25 AP courses, and a small faculty to student ratio of 1:15. The average SAT score of a St. Zachary student is 1264 and the Average ACT score is 28. Approximately 99% of St. Zachary graduates go on to attend a 4-year college/university—many of them Ivy League schools. Only 26% of the student body receives tuition assistance to attend St. Zachary. Tuition for the 2007 – 2008 academic year is $9,875.00. About 10% of the St. Zachary population is comprised of minorities.

St. Mary’s is an all female, private, (9-12) Catholic high school established in 1910 by an order of Catholic nuns. It has a student population of about 713. St. Mary's campus is considerably smaller than the other two schools in the study in large part because its location is in the heart of the inner city which limits the potential growth of the school. (The school is located in a predominately Black, lower income neighborhood with a median income of just $23,198). Although lacking in acreage, the school's grounds still look stately—a 200 year old brick building gives an appearance more reminiscent of a convent than a school and the in-school chapel is as beautiful as any church with stained glass windows and marble fixtures.

St. Mary's offers an intensive four-year program in the fields of English, mathematics, science, social studies, French, Spanish, Latin, and religion. An entrance test is required of all prospective freshmen students. Academic scholarships are also based on the results of this test. It boasts a small faculty student ratio of 1:12.
St Mary's is also competitive academically. 100% of graduates from the Class of 2006 enrolled in college. In the past five years, an average of 12% of the seniors have been honored by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation as finalists, semi-finalists, or commended students. Tuition for the 2007-2008 academic year is $9,500.00. Approximately 24% of the student body receives tuition assistance. The minority student population average is 7%.

The Hills Day School is a co-ed private, Catholic, (K-12) founded in 1890 by the Sisters of Notre Dame. Hills Country Day has a total student population of 1,085 about 300 of which make up the upper school (grades 9-12) but it also has a Montessori, a Primary School and Middle School. It's campus almost looks like a combination of the other two schools—sprawling like St. Zachary's with a football field, a theater, and several buildings on campus (each school is housed a separate building) and stately like St. Mary's—anchored by a 200 year old brick building which houses a beautiful chapel on campus.

Hills Country Day also has a selective admissions process—particularly for the ninth grade year. Since places are held for HCD middle schoolers who graduate from the 8th grade and scholarships are not given until high school, entering 9th grade is an especially competitive enterprise. Candidates applying to ninth grade are encouraged to begin the application process in October of their eighth-grade year. Applicants must submit the following: English, Math, and principal or counselor recommendation forms; school records from the previous two years; student application; and parent application and recommendation forms. They are also required to take an entrance exam (HSPT) High School Placement Test.

Hills Country Day is also very competitive academically. It offers between 18-21 Advanced Placement (AP) courses; 87% of students take at least one AP course; 85% score 3, 4,
or 5. Additional honors courses available; collegiate schedule; accelerated curriculum; outstanding writing program. In 2008, the median combined SAT score was 1260 (650 Critical Reading 610 math). The faculty/student ratio is 1:9. College placement is also 100%, with many students attending Ivy League colleges and universities. For the 2007-2008 school year, tuition for the high school is $14,495. The minority population is about 8%. Over the past four years, more than 20% of each senior class has been recognized by the National Merit Scholarship Program; over the past 10 years, a total of 147 students have been recognized.

INTERVIEWEES

All three of the schools (in addition to the other 4 independent schools not included in this study) offer students the opportunity to become a member of an organization called RAISE (Raising African-American Awareness in a School and Social Environment). RAISE is a city-wide black student union comprised only of students from the local independent schools. Only one of the three schools (St. Mary’s) has a Black student union in the traditional sense. Each of the other schools has a diversity group or a multicultural awareness group with open membership to all students—including Whites. Many of the schools no longer allow Black student unions proper on their individual campuses because students interested in Black issues specifically are encouraged to attend RAISE meetings and events. RAISE was initially the recruiting ground for the students in the study.

Because of the way in which they were recruited, many of the students belonged to a diversity group; however, all did not. Because the Black population at each school is so small, it was rather easy to identify appropriate candidates for the study whether they socialized with other Blacks or not. The students who did not belong to diversity groups were recruited either
through a flyer or upon the recommendation of other students or school administrators. This
gave the sample more variation than it would have had if I had only focused on students who
belonged to the diversity groups originally targeted.

All the participants were high school students between 13-18 years of age. All of the
students self identified as African-American with a couple of nuances. One girl who attended the
all female school was biracial. Two of the students (a boy and a girl) at the co-ed school had
parents who were first generation immigrants from Africa. Most of the students identified
themselves as working class or lower middle class. A few of the students identified themselves
as middle class. None identified themselves as elite.

In the interest of full disclosure I should note that I am an alumnus of one of the schools
in the study (Hills Country Day) and a co-founder of the RAISE group. Therefore my interest in
these questions as applied to these school environments is more than theoretical, it is also
personal. I have yet to see the experiences I had in high school documented in a way that
adequately represent what my peers and I went through. I asked the questions I asked to the
students in part to give a voice to what has been a largely ignored population. Some of what the
students expressed is in fact different from what I experienced 15 years ago; for instance
interracial dating is more common now, but many consistencies remain such as how to negotiate
being high achieving and being Black. It would seem that the process of negotiating a Black
identity in an elite environment is indeed a tricky process that deserves our attention.

THE INTERVIEWS
Students were interviewed one-on-one using a digital recorder. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was later transcribed. Prior to the interview, students were asked to consider what they would like others to know about the experience of being a black student at a predominantly white school. Students were asked to provide their age, their grade, their school, their school activities, and the number of years they have attended a predominantly white school.

Interview questions included (but were not limited to):

1. Do you have a diversity group at your school? If yes has it made a difference at your school? Positive? Negative? Combination? (If so explain)

2. If you don’t have a diversity group at your school, do you think you need one? Why or why not?

3. What kinds of pressures, if any, do you face being African American at your school?

4. What does being Black mean to you? What does it mean in terms of how you behave? What does it mean in terms of how you expect others to behave?

5. What do you think constitutes “acting White”?

6. Who do you interact with more, other Black students or White students? Why? In what context?

7. Does race or ethnicity play a role in your relationships? Does it matter what kind of relationship it is?

8. Do you mostly hang out with the other Black students at your school? Why or why not? In what situations?

9. What are some of the advantages of interacting with the other Blacks/Whites at your school?

10. What are some of the disadvantages of interacting with the other Blacks/Whites at your school?
11. If you belong to a mostly Black group, how do you decide who’s in and who’s not?

12. Is it important to be loyal to the group? How do you express loyalty?

13. What are some of the “deal breakers” that could cause someone to be ostracized from the group?

14. Is it okay to have friends across racial lines?

15. Is it okay to date across racial lines?

16. Have you experienced any forms of discrimination at your school? If yes, please describe?

17. Have you ever heard any name calling across racial lines?

18. What racial or ethnic groups do you most frequently associate with outside of school?

19. Do you see school friends/acquaintances outside of school? If so, does that fall along racial lines or across racial lines?

20. Do you think there is a division between the whites and blacks at your school? Why or why not?

21. What do you think would happen if the Black population at your school doubled?

22. Do you feel accepted by the school at large?

23. If there was anything you could change about your school what would that be?

24. Are there times when you feel excluded from other students at your school? Why or why not?

25. What else would you like to say about life at your school?

I included as many of these questions as I could fit into the one hour time frame—Occasionally I went off script to ask follow-ups and clarification questions but we usually managed to get through a majority of the questions before the interview ended.
RESULTS

This study seeks to put into perspective how four different coping strategies—assimilation, integration or "cultural straddling" (Carter 2005), separation, and marginalization each play a role in the negotiation of racial identity. Because previous studies have set up these strategies as mutually exclusive binaries, rather than explore each strategy on its own (and in the process reinforce the binary model) I will show how these strategies happen simultaneously in various situational contexts in the process of "everyday race-making" (Lewis 2003) at school. The first section will explore how coping strategies emerge when Blacks are interacting with the White majority. Students were asked about academics, extra-curricular activities as well as their social life outside of school in order to glean if certain coping strategies were more salient in certain contexts than in others. In this section I will engage and challenge Fordham & Ogbu's (1986) "acting White" hypothesis, which links student's low achievement to conceptions of Blackness and posits that high achieving Blacks are subjected to charges of "acting White," as well as Carter's (2005) refinement which argues that for most Black students, "acting White" refers to social, not academic, behavior.

How do Black students cope with the White majority?

Assimilation to “the school academic standard” as a coping strategy

Much has been made of “the achievement gap” between Black and White students in general, but little attention has been paid to high achieving Blacks for whom this is not an issue. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) have argued that there is a link between achievement and racial identity—the inference being that high achievement is connected to Whiteness and low
achievement connected to Blackness. However, much has changed since the 1980s when Fordham and Ogbu's "acting white" hypothesis was first posited. There are a lot more high achieving Blacks now than there were then and frankly we should know a lot more than we do about them. It seems prudent to ask; how do high achieving Blacks negotiate their racial identities? To put it another way: does achieving academic excellence put a Black student on a path toward being rejected by his/her peers as “acting White?” (Fordham 1995) The answer appears to be—not necessarily. Context is important—the answer appears contingent upon the type of school, the types of students, and how hostile or open the school is toward Black students. While the “acting white hypothesis” (Fordham & Ogbu 1986) may in fact be normative in some inner city schools – most notably Capital High- it does not necessarily extend to other populations of Black students particularly those in elite schools.

According to the majority of students I interviewed, there is no contradiction between Blackness and being high achieving because of the elite nature of the schools. Because these schools require high scores on entrance exams, and a minimum of a "B" grade point average for students on a scholarship, Black students who feel a contradiction between achievement and Blackness are not likely to be admitted. Pretty much all of the students assimilate to the school’s academic standards and have even developed a conception of Blackness that propels them to achieve more and to keep their grades up because of the threat of expulsion. Each member of the Black student community becomes an essential part of it and students often tutored one another to ensure each other’s academic success. Outside of school, however, many reported feeling their “Blackness” challenged, because their behavior seemed to be at odds with other people’s conception of Blackness.
Michelle: Okay. So, you’re the one that’s in all the AP classes and everything. So, do you feel like being high-achieving separates you from other Black people? First I want you to talk about other Black people in this school, and then I want you to talk about other Black people sort of at large.

Camille: Umm…I don’t think at this school really, because I think everyone at this school, like, values education. But, maybe with Black people at other places, they might think that it’s kind of weird that I study a lot and…because maybe that value hasn’t necessarily been placed in their home, or in their school even. So, yeah, I feel like outside of school I might be a little, not excluded, but like…

Michelle: But not inside of school?

Camille: Right. (Camille, St. Mary’s)

The fact that these students were preparing themselves for college, dressing in uniforms (which were mandatory at both HCD and St. Mary’s) or adhering to a “preppy” dress code (mandatory at St. Zachary) speaking “proper” English and often forgoing social events to study often put them at odds with their Black friends at other schools. However, within their own schools none of these behaviors were viewed as inconsistent with being Black. Studying together became a way for them to build solidarity with other Blacks. By forming study groups (and socializing with one another) they enabled themselves to find support in the face of being ostracized from many Whites at their schools-- and from other Blacks outside their schools.

For most of these Black students in elite schools the pressure is on. Many believe that they have to not only work as hard as the White students, but they have to work harder to prove to the Whites at their school that they deserve to be in these environments. They usually describe the White population as suspicious at best and hostile at worst. The Black students often felt as if they had to justify their presence to other students (and sometimes teachers) that seemed to question their abilities and credentials. In fact over-achieving academically became a way they could prove racists wrong.
Michelle: Do you think it’s harder to be a black student here than it is to be a White student here?

Jamal: Of course.

Michelle: Why?

Jamal: I mean, it’s just…it’s like…I don’t know, it’s like you stand out so much because it’s 1,400 students and not even 200 minorities here. So you stand out from each other,[so you try to] stand out for all the good reasons, not the bad reasons, and like, it’s just, like, whenever you do good it’s just like the typical stereotypes, of like “Who’d you cheat off of?” and stuff like that.

Michelle: Do people actually say that to you?

Jamal: Yeah. They usually be playin’, but they still say it. (Jamal, St. Zachary)

As evidenced by this example, Black students seem to be engaged in an uphill battle against negative stereotypes. When Jamal disproves the “Blacks as academically inferior” stereotype by performing well, he is then subjected to another more insidious stereotype, “Blacks as cheaters.” This example is not the only way that Black students are tested. Jay, another student at St. Zachary’s, laments that people dismiss his academic abilities by writing him off as (in his words) “an affirmative action case.”

Jay: Umm, just…you just always have to be on top of your game, like I said. You have to have your school aligned, you have to have the grades, you have to have the…not to say be Uncle Tom, but you have to know how to work their game. You have to know how to survive in their society to be successful in life. …And I feel that as a minority it doesn’t hurt…I really feel that other people are just discredited like me when they say that I’m only here because of a quota….but when people are here from tradition and legacy… you’re here just because your family was here.

So, that’s the only thing that I would say, that when I’m here or when I’m at another place, that I always have to be correct, and I always have to come in with a nice outfit, and I have to make sure that I’m speaking proper and I’m making sure that…well, not speaking proper but speaking correct English, and just make sure that I’m always…I’m more in tune to society where I have to live in, in order to survive and be successful instead of just being how I am around others (Blacks) and my friends and stuff like that, so… (Jay, St. Zachary)
In his mind, Jay feels pressure to assimilate to White standards while in school and present himself “properly” there rather than be his “normal self” that he expresses when he is around his friends and family. The demands of the school require that he get good grades, speak proper English, and present himself as a clean cut “St. Zachary man.” Jay has not only accepted these standards, he has done so (as he so carefully points out) in a non-“Uncle Tom” way, meaning he can “play the game” when he needs to but he still knows how to express Black culture—a more muted version for St. Zachary, "instead of just being how (he is) around other Blacks or friends" which implies he has an unfettered persona around family and friends. Jay wants to succeed academically not only because of the school standards, or because of what it means to him individually (although both factors seem to be relevant), but also to prove that Black people can be successful at St. Zachary. Morris, a classmate of Jay’s puts it even more bluntly.

Morris: I say, well, they can say we got in on affirmative action, but they do the same thing, just ‘cuz their fathers and their brothers and their grandpas, and their great-grandpas, and their great-great-great-great-great-grandpas, they all went here. They get legacy, or whatever. They get extra points on their test. It’s the same thing. Like, they have affirmative action to get in here; we do too. Actually, some of us are actually smarter than they are…. It just happens that some of the White guys are just incredibly stupid… And, (laughs) they’re still here at St. Zachary. I don’t know how they’re making it…

Michelle: How’s your situation different from theirs?

Morris: Um, or I guess I feel like I gotta prove myself sometimes, just because of my skin color, I guess. Or, because there’s not that many of us here, I feel like I gotta represent, I guess, a bigger group or body than I really should have to. (Morris, St. Zachary).

Many students, not just at St. Zachary, expressed the tension that existed between White students whose parents “bought their way into the school,” and the Black students who were disproportionately there on scholarships. The former group was likely to write the majority of
the Black students off as affirmative action cases regardless of their academic performance. The latter group not only resented being labeled in that way, but many felt that some of the privileged Whites were less intelligent and did not see the need to work as hard as they (the Black students) had to, to keep their scholarships.

Michelle: Okay. Uh...what if any pressures do you feel like you face being a minority at this kind of school?

Tamika: I don't feel like I have any pressure because I'm like a person with a lot of self-esteem, and then I have my friends there. So it (the pressure of being a minority) doesn't really affect me as much. But, other than that, like, it seems like wealth will be a factor, 'cuz this school is all about money. Most of the kids that go here, like a lot of them aren't really intelligent. I mean, don't get me wrong...there are a lot of intelligent people at this school. But then again, like a lot of people in my grade they’re more wealthy than they are intelligent.

Michelle: So they’re like legacies?

Tamika: Yeah.

Michelle: You don’t think they could have gotten into this school if their parents didn’t have money?

Tamika: Not really. (Tamika, HCD)

The Black students seemed to be really conscious of how their academic performance in high school could radically affect their futures. It could open doors to prestigious colleges, good paying jobs, and changes the trajectory of their lives for the better. When they compared themselves to their White peers, they did not think the Whites had to work as hard because the future was all but guaranteed to them.

Michelle: So I want to hear about this achievement with the Black students. Because I would think that at a school like this you’d sort of have to be high-achieving to get here, to even get in, and definitely sort of high-achieving to stay. Is that the case or not?

Sarah: It is. I mean, you...there are people who just came in here from eighth grade and they’re like, “Well, yeah. My parents are paying the money. Let’s just keep going. I could really care less because I’ve got, you know, a 4-million-dollar
trust fund to fall back on.” And when you don’t have a 4-million-dollar trust fund to fall back on, like most of the population, you’ve gotta work at it. You’ve gotta keep the grades up. You’ve gotta sacrifice the fun times to get the studying done, because you know that my parents, as much as they’ve saved for me for college, it’s not going to cover the kind of school I want to go into. So I’ve got to get the grades up to get the scholarship, and that kind of stuff. (Sarah, HCD)

For many students the pressure they felt to achieve academically was expressed both in the language of representing the race but also in the language of representing the school. Although they arguably had more specific demands placed on them because of their identities as minorities, they were also likely to express the pressure to achieve in terms of school expectations. In this way they were not only representing Black people to the school, but representing their school to the world.

Michelle: So, tell me something about the achievement in black students here. Do you guys do just as well in school, or is doing well in school considered acting white? What’s going on with that?

Rita: No, doing well in school is just you doing well in school.

Michelle: That’s just expected?

Rita: Yeah. I guess it’s expected. That’s just you know, doing what you should do, what you’re supposed to do, since you’re a St. Mary’s student. (Rita, St. Mary’s)

Extra Curricular Activities—*Coping strategies in "play"

Almost all of the interviewees stated that they were involved in at least two or three extracurricular activities at school. When asked why, a litany of responses were provided with the most popular reasons being “because it looks good when applying to college,” “because my parents (or the school) expects me to” or simply “to make friends”. Extracurricular activities are fertile ground for examination because many of the coping strategies discussed in this paper are revealed through which activities the students are involved in and how they participate.
Assimilation, integration or separation (which will be discussed later) are all plausible coping strategies depending upon the context of the extracurricular activity. Often students will assimilate to the standards of the activity. Integration is also possible (albeit rarer) if and when minorities achieve parity with Whites when involved in an activity. For instance, if we accept Kanter’s (1977) contention that true integration is only possible when a minority population has an almost even presence as the majority population (between 30-60%) then, if a school only has a 10% population of Black students overall but an even number of Blacks and Whites on the basketball team, the team could be said to be integrated while the school is merely desegregated.

Integration is usually more empowering to Black students than assimilation because a greater presence usually lends them a greater voice and more opportunity to construct and express their cultural identity. However, because they are so vastly outnumbered in elite schools there are few opportunities for true integration. Therefore, assimilation to the standards of the extracurricular activity in question is usually their best option. School related extracurricular activities are the primary way in which Black students connect to the White majority. These activities provide the students with a chance to get acquainted with people who share their interests or talents. It also allows them the opportunity to step out of their racial comfort zones.

Carmen: If you play a sport or something, you get to know more of ‘em…And like if you are out and involved in stuff, you meet more people and that’s how you make your friends, if you don’t just sit around and just sit by yourself and stuff. And I think it’s basically the same for the boys and girls… (Carmen, HCD)

Race often becomes less salient in activities such as sports or the drama club. According to the students, the interest in the activity itself tended to override other barriers and boundaries. This indicates that school extracurricular activities are spaces where solidarity built around
common interests can trump solidarity built around having the same race or ethnicity in common. Most of the students assimilated to the standards and behaviors associated with the activity in question—even those who were reluctant to assimilate at other times.

Jamal: Football is football. If you can play, you can play. If you can’t, you can’t. It doesn’t matter what color you are… There’s really no race on the football fields. The best man plays… (Jamal, St. Zachary).

As this example illustrates, in the context of football, Jamal chose to have his identity as “football player” take precedence over his racial identity. Yet, context is important. Jamal is the same student who contended that it was much more difficult to be a Black student at St. Zachary’s and that when he performed well academically he was accused of cheating simply because he was Black. So it is not as if he is never conscious of his racial identity or that it is never counted against him. However, when he is playing football according to him, “there is no race”—there is only a game to be played in which the same standards are equally applied to everyone. In the context of football, Jamal does not experience his Blackness as a barrier.

Many of the students, especially those who played sports, echoed Jamal’s sentiments about how race often takes a back seat to other aspects of their identities—like that of being an athlete. In Jamal’s case he self identified as a football player first, at least while he was on the field. In other cases, the identification of being an athlete especially on a winning team was enough to open up other doors and opportunities that were generally closed to Black students.

Michelle: Okay. I’m just curious. Is it possible… to be in the “in-crowd” here if you’re a black student?

Helena: Um-hmm.

Michelle: You can?
Helena: Um-hmm.

Michelle: How, who is the in-crowd here? Describe the typical in-crowd member here.

Helena: Soccer players…

Michelle: (Laughs) Why are soccer players so popular?

Helena: Because they win stuff. (Helena, St. Mary’s).

Assimilation to a winning football or soccer team could provide a path to assimilation to the “in crowd” and to the White majority itself. However, many other factors can (and often do) block the path to assimilating fully. One factor is the difference between how the Black students and White students party outside of school (which will be discussed later). Another factor is gaining access to play on a varsity team in the first place. Jay, a St. Zachary student has rather strong opinions about who is allowed access and why.

Michelle: Umm, if there’s anything that you would change about this school, what would it be?

Jay: I guess sports, I see a double standard…like, when you look at our sports teams you see one minority on each team, and that’s it. You can see that there’s a lot of favoritism due to legacies, and due the money that they bring to this school. Like, if your parents contribute a lot you’re going to get on the team. Like, that’s just known. Like, you’re going to get on the team and you might…you possibly will start. So, I just say, instead of just looking at talent sometimes they do look at…it sometimes is political...

And like, again, it’s kind of sad, though, because you look at it and some [other people] are better than some of the people that make it. But, again it’s political. But, it happens, you know. You can’t do anything about it. You just get involved in everything else you can get, because I think that, like, I’m more involved in community service than I would be in sports…

I play sports, but I just don’t…I just chose not to play here just because of the politics here, and it’s a lot of pressure for someone to play a sport here, because you’re not only playing just for you but you’re playing, like, all the money that’s coming, that’s being contributed to the school because of sports. (Jay, St. Zachary)
The elite nature of the schools means that race and class can combine in very powerful ways that often inhibit minority students from experiencing all that the schools have to offer—especially athletics. One reason is that it is usually very expensive to play sports—the cost of equipment and training camps excludes many students who simply cannot afford the expense. Another reason, as a few of the students commented, is that elites often use their money and power to influence who gets on various teams. Social class and race intersect in a powerful way to induce a "pay to play" environment that by its very nature excludes Black students who have neither the finances nor the legacy pedigree to have a fair chance to play many team sports. When the desire to play sports is met with the lack of opportunity, Black students can become marginalized.

Morris: It just so happens that most of the teams where you have to like make the cuts, or whatever, it just happens that most of them are White. So, I mean, it kind of says something, ‘cuz like, I mean, at least for me…it just so happens that in the baseball program like you don’t really see that many minorities at all, or in the basketball program you don’t see that many at all. It just makes you wonder, like, where, I mean, are people just not qualified for the team, or…I don’t know.

Michelle: Well, in some ways that seems counter-intuitive, or at least different than the stereotype, because a lot of people think the Black students that are going to St. Zachary are…

Morris: Athletes…But then [the school sets], their own expectations. Like, I don’t know, for basketball you have to be like above 6 feet tall and you gotta do this, you gotta to be able to dunk, do this, this and this, or baseball you have to be like a pitcher or a catcher.. .in the recreational (intramural) sports we [the Black guys] dominate…I just feel like sometimes they don’t really give us, I guess a fair shot at making some of the [varsity] sports teams.

Michelle: So you think that some of these requirements are institutionalized ways to… control who’s on the team?

Morris: Yeah, to stick to the traditional.

Michelle: Do you think the class location has anything to do with these decisions?
Morris: Oh yes. That’s a big influence at this school, is how much money you put in.

Michelle: Does that matter more than race, as much as race?

Morris: It matters more.

Michelle: More than race?

Morris: It definitely matters more. (Morris, St. Zachary)

As previously discussed, how Black students participate in school activities illustrates how these coping strategies can play out differently. Extracurricular activities can provide minorities with opportunities they may not otherwise have, however, they can also provide further evidence of their separation or marginalization from the majority. When students do not feel they have access to the activities they are interested in, sometimes they will create a separate social world that will allow them access to those opportunities—or they may simply give up trying. Lack of access is one of the reasons separation manifests itself as a coping mechanism. Many of the boys at St. Zachary felt as if they were not being given a fair chance to play on the varsity basketball team. In response, they formed an all Black intramural team. They separated to create an opportunity they would not otherwise have had.

Michelle: Okay. Um, do you think there’s a division between the Whites and Blacks at your school, and why or why not?

Morris: Yeah, I think there’s a definite division. I mean, some people, some white people you might be tight with, or cool with. Other ones are always looking to say, like, “Oh, this is a white thing; this is a black thing.” Like, I know for simple stuff like the intramural basketball league, it just so happens that all the Black kids…there’s not that many of us…like they just made one team, and they called it The Truth. And like, this one team, because they’re all white, ‘cuz all the rest of the teams just happen to be white cuz there are more white people, they called themselves The False, ‘cuz it’s just the opposite of the Black people…But they do it like every year. They do like the opposite every year, like this one group of people. So, I mean, it’s a division… (Morris, St. Zachary).
What is interesting about the anecdote Morris shares is that not only does he sense an invisible line drawn between the Black and White students at his school, but each group seems invested in defining itself in opposition to the other in a dialectical fashion. This is happening to such an extent that when the Black students named their intramural basketball squad “the true” a white squad called itself “the false.” In this way both groups, Black and White, seem invested in separation as a coping strategy and in defining themselves oppositionally to one another.

**Partying: Social spaces = Separate places**

The social space outside of school seems to be the most difficult to integrate. Racial boundaries appear to be at their most entrenched when it comes to who students spend their free time with and also what they spend their free time doing. Many studies have shown that intimate friendships are more likely to occur within racial lines than across them (Proweller 1999, Tatum 1998, Hallinan & Teixeira 1987). There should be little surprise then that the main coping strategy adopted in terms of partying is separation. Unlike extracurricular activities, because parties happen outside of school (and usually outside the presence of various authority figures), there is no external pressure put on the students to reach across racial lines. Consequently, students, both Black and White, tend to fall back on their racial comfort zones. According to Rita social invitations are rarely extended to Black students and generally only to those who choose to assimilate.

Rita: It’s hard for Black students to be accepted by the White students. I guess it depends on like how you act toward them. If you act, you know, all cool with them, they’ll be like, “Oh, you’re cool…blah, blah”, but if you act, like…like you’re loud or something…like they’ll shun you or something like that. Or if they feel like you’re not good enough for them, then they won’t talk to you at all. (Rita, St. Mary’s).
Not only do White students tend not to invite Black students to socialize with them, many Black students seem ambivalent about it, preferring instead to socialize with one another. Black students in particular seem to gravitate toward one another outside of school to supplement the fact that they have little contact with others like themselves inside of school. Andy, a student at Hills Country Day, is one of the rare students who does socialize with Whites outside of school and he knows he’s an anomaly.

Michelle: Do you get invited to the parties and stuff that happen here?
Andy: Yes, I do. Usually I’m one of the only Black people there, but…
Michelle: Why do you think the other Black people don’t get invited? Or do they get invited and not show?
Andy: Sometimes they get invited but they don’t show, but sometimes they’re just not invited at all. And I just think that’s just because maybe they don’t…like, they might stay with their own race, racial group, and they don’t try to make friends with others, I guess. (Andy, HCD)

Most of the Black students interviewed did not regularly attend parties with “their White friends from school.” They were either not invited or, if they were, expressed little interest in having it become a habit. One of the main reasons they gave was the desire to spend their free time interacting with other Blacks- which will be discussed later. Another important reason the students gave for not partying with their White classmates is that “White parties” focused on drinking while “Black parties” focused on dancing and meeting potential dates and most of the students expressed a preference for the latter.

Michelle: Do the Black kids and the White kids party differently?
Rita: Umm… I think the White people drink more than the Black people here. Um…I guess the music would be the same, even though I guess there would be like a little bit more country with the White kids than the Black kids.
Michelle: So what’s the party, if the party isn’t based on drinking when Black people party the way that it’s based on drinking when the White students, from
what you’re telling me…What’s the party based on when Black kids are partying, then?

Rita: Just being together partying. That’s what I feel like, Like, you know, just like talking, dancing, doing like a little, maybe a little two-step thing…I don’t know. And I guess the Black people don’t really need to drink… (Rita, St. Mary’s)

Rita was not the only student to express this opinion.

Michelle: Is going to a party where you’re with mostly white kids different from being at a party with mostly black kids?

Camille: Yeah, I think it is different.

Michelle: How?

Camille: Honestly, at the white parties there’s more drinking.

Michelle: What’s going on at the Black parties instead of drinking?

Camille: Dancing. (Camille, St. Mary’s)

In terms of who gets invited to parties outside of school—especially those held by “the in crowd,” both race and class seemed to play a major role. There was a definite class division between the Blacks who were invited to the “White parties” and the Blacks who were not.

Middle class Blacks perceived that they got more invitations to parties than their working class counterparts. This pattern was noticed by both Crystal, a working class Black student at Hills Country Day, and Sarah, a middle class Black student at Hills Country Day.

Michelle: Do you get invited to the parties and stuff here?

Crystal: Uh, not really…

Michelle: Are Black students usually invited to those parties, or not?

Crystal: Umm, I think it depends on who the Black students are. The lower class Black students aren’t really invited to them. (Crystal, HCD)

Crystal was not the only student to notice a class division.

Michelle: Do you get invited to a lot of the parties and things?

Sarah: Yes
Michelle: Do you think that, umm, that your class location makes the White students treat you differently than maybe some of the other Black students?

Sarah: Umm…I’d like to say it doesn’t, but it probably does. Just, you know, not trying to be all idealistic and such. Umm…I mean I party with my friends. You know, we’re not drinkers or pot smokers; I mean, a couple of them are, but we usually don’t do it when we hang out. It’s usually like movies, sleepovers, stuff like that…birthdays, not your hard-core partiers like some of the (in crowd) people are here. (Sarah, HCD)

Differences in race, class, and alcohol and drug consumption all seem to be major factors that help explain the social separation between Blacks and Whites especially outside of school. However the issue is not simply that Black students are not interested in going to “White parties.” It would appear that many Whites are engaging in boundary maintenance, in terms of both purposefully excluding Blacks and not instrumentally including them-- especially socially. Some of the themes of the parties provide tell-tell signs of who is supposed to be included and who is not. An anecdote shared by Tamika of Hills Country Day provides an excellent example of how these differences play out.

Michelle: So, are you invited to the parties and things that go on here?

Tamika: I’m not invited to, like, umm, some of the stuck-up white people’s parties, ‘cuz like a couple weekends ago they had this party called “golf pros and tennis hos” or something like that… So, I wasn’t invited to that, but I don’t think I would have wanted to be in that type of environment anyway. [The girls who gave the party] she’s the type person…she’s really wild, and she is into drugs and alcohol and stuff like that, so I’m guessing all the other stuck-up people that are into drugs and alcohol were invited.

Michelle: Would you say she’s one of the in-crowd members here?

Tamika: Yeah.

Michelle: Are there any, uh, Black people in that in-crowd?

Tamika: No. ‘Cuz some of the people that hang with her are racists themselves.

Michelle: Okay. So do you think…would be possible for even a rich Black person to enter that group, do you think?
Tamika: Not unless they act like them. (Tamika, HCD).

Even without being extended an invitation, Tamika knew intuitively that a “golf pro and tennis ho” party was not intended for her. The class implications are obvious and the racial implications although slightly more subtle are also present. Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters notwithstanding, golf and tennis are still primarily the province of the uber-rich, White, country club set. A party of this nature is meant to be exclusive not inclusive. Both race and class provide deeply entrenched and efficient ways to exclude people. Yet even in Tamika's account race is not an absolute barrier but instead one linked to the enactment of identity; hence it’s yet another barrier that Black students have to negotiate…even as race is more directly implicated in this example than other more presumably “neutral” activities like sports. Tamika’s story actually got more interesting when she shared the fact that the White girl who gave the party had in the past gone out of her way to be friends with many of the Black students but had started to change all of a sudden.

Tamika: The girl I told you had the party, she’s White but she used to hang around all Black people last year. And now like over the summer she just changed. It was her, this other…there was some other White girls that were included, but they all hung around each other last year, but the one girl changed, and then so she’s hanging around all White people now.

Michelle: Has she become more popular now since she’s done that?

Tamika: Yeah, I would say so. (Tamika, SCD).

There are several noteworthy points about Tamika’s story. First, the girl who had the party was (at least initially) not racist, yet she threw this exclusive party and did not invite any of the Blacks she used to hang around. Secondly, while distancing herself from the Blacks, she gained status from the Whites and joined the ranks of the “in crowd.” Tamika implies that the girl in question sacrificed her friendships with the Black students, in order to make “popular”
friends. In actuality the White girl's rise in popularity might not have had anything to do with her Black friends—she could have become more popular because she began drinking and "partying harder." What matters is that Tamika thinks that seeking popularity is a viable way to explain why some Whites do not maintain friendships with Blacks. This narrative shows how prejudice which is often only conceived of in psychological terms can also result from social pressure. Another Black student told a story similar to this about a White friend who seemed to grow more distant over time or was subjected to ostracization or ridicule for becoming close with Black students. Carmen, an African American student at Hills Country Day, had this to say:

Carmen: I was...like, I heard that people would treat me differently and stuff. I haven’t...like, no one’s like said any racist comments to me or anything. But like my friend, like my best friend, she’s White; she said that people were talking about her for hanging with me. And like, um, some guy would walk up to her and point on his skin whenever he saw her hanging with me, but I haven’t seen him do that, either.

Michelle: So, do you think you’re protected from it but your White friends are getting the brunt of it?

Carmen: Yeah. (Carmen, SCD).

The transitory nature of school relationships is already difficult without the added pressure of race and class boundaries. In this context social separation can be seen as a desirable option by both groups because external peer pressure is often racialized. Both Black and White students are tentative about crossing too far over racial boundaries which can result in them losing popularity within their own homogenous groups.

**Summary:** **How do Black students cope with the White majority?**

With reference to how Black students interact with Whites, assimilation, integration, and separation seem to be the main coping strategies at work. In terms of academics, assimilation to the high standard of each school in question was overwhelmingly "the norm." Contrary to
Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) "acting White" hypothesis, this study finds that not only was high achievement NOT seen as "acting White" by the Black students, doing well in school was often described in pro Black terms such as "representing the race" and "to prove that Blacks can do well in elite schools." When charges of "acting White" were leveled at these students it was either because; a) the people leveling the charges attended public schools similar to Capital High that actually reflect Fordham & Ogbu's "acting White" theory or b) the charge was made to describe the social behavior of the students and not their academic behavior. This finding supports Carter's 2005 study.

Extra-curricular activities seemed to provide a pathway to each of the coping strategies—assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. Students often assimilated to sports teams. Comments like "there is no race on the football field" or "all the soccer players (even the Black ones) are popular because they win stuff" show that race can be negotiated to take a back seat to other aspects of a person's identity such as athletic prowess. Sports also provided an avenue for integration. Often sports teams—basketball and football in particular—had more diversity on the squad than was reflected in the school at large. Since true integration (as opposed to merely desegregation) is contingent upon at least a 30% representation of a minority group (Kanter 1977) sports, and clubs were potentially the only places in these school environments where true integration was a possibility. Gaining access to play on sports teams, however could sometimes prove to be tricky. Because of prohibitive costs as well as how the elites often played politics about who made various teams, Black students sometimes became marginalized from playing sports. At St. Zachary rather than accept their marginalization, the Black students formed an all-Black intramural basketball team—they separated to create a niche for an opportunity they would not otherwise have had. In a bizarre, counterintuitive way, their
separation to form an all Black squad actually produced a truly integrated experience. When the Black intramural basketball team played a White one it was a rare example of racial parity on St. Zachary's campus.

In addition, when the students did socialize with other students either at dances or outside of school, they noticed a tangible difference between "White parties" and "Black parties." According to the students in this study, "White parties" focused on drinking and because most of the Black students did not drink they were not interested. Most would not go to that kind of party even if invited, and getting an invitation was also not likely to occur. As stated previously, social separation can be seen as a desirable option by both groups because external peer pressure is often racialized. Both Black and White students are tentative about crossing too far over racial boundaries which can result in them losing popularity within their own homogenous groups.

II: How do Black students cope with other Black students?

This section will explore the coping strategies that emerge when Blacks are interacting with other Blacks. Again, students were asked about academics, extra-curricular activities as well as their social life outside of school in order to glean if certain coping strategies were more salient in certain contexts than in others. In this section I discuss what the students themselves mean by "acting White" and "acting Black." I engage Tatum's (1999) supposition that "all the Black children are sitting together in the cafeteria" and apply a sociological analysis. I will provide a context and an analysis of how "cultural straddlers" (Carter 2005) strategically move across cultural spaces. I will also examine if there are gendered differences in how racial negotiations occur.
**Acting White vs. Acting Black—Total assimilation vs. Temporary assimilation**

For these Black students attending predominately White schools, “acting White” and “acting Black” was not a question of academics but of identity. When the students were asked about acting White versus acting Black a whole host of behaviors came to the forefront most notably things associated with consumer culture—fashion (urban vs. preppy), music (R & B and Rap vs. Country and Rock n Roll), speech patterns (street vernacular vs. “proper”), but especially the social space or “who you hang out with”. For African-American students in elite schools, “acting Black” meant staying in touch with one’s own culture in the aforementioned ways and “acting White” meant assimilation beyond the point of no return.

Michelle: Okay. If you belong to a mostly Black group, then how do you decide who’s in and who’s not?

Camille: It’s mostly based on who they interact with. Like, for example, some people don’t even come to the black stuff, like the meetings after school, and I don’t really come that much because I have like an after school activity every day, so I come when I really can and I really like to be in it, but the other people who could come but don’t, those are the people that are out.

Michelle: Okay… So aside from who you hang out with, what do you think constitutes acting White?

Camille: Well, if you dress like them. If you wear the Polos and the, like, the Ugg boots, and the Birkenstocks… (Camille St. Mary’s)

Consumer culture is of course a major preoccupation with teenagers no matter what their race/ethnicity. For Black teenagers, however, consumer culture is also a way to express an interest in and an allegiance to Black culture itself (even with all its variation). Students attending elite schools in particular often felt that the authenticity of their Blackness was being challenged by other Blacks and sometimes even Whites. Therefore their choices in music and fashion were at least partially influenced by a pressure to be culturally aware.
Michelle: Okay. What is that, acting black, in the context of the black girls at this school?

Jessie: Umm...like just wearing clothes like Baby Phat stuff, you know...

Michelle: Right. So, what does being black mean to you?

Jessie: Umm...I’m really proud that I can experience both sides, Black and White, just because I can understand, I can relate to both the sides, you know. I’m...Sometimes I actually feel more comfortable, umm, with Caucasian people, just because I think there’s more pressure put on me from like, from African-American people because...

Michelle: Yeah. That’s interesting. I want you to explain that to me a little bit more, umm, about the pressure you think you face from African-American students, and why you think that is. What form does it take?

Jessie: Umm, well, I feel that there’s just pressure put on me to be sort of, umm, ghetto. Umm...just to, you know, I’m not really like good at dancing, I guess, and you know, you should, yeah...so, just that I should be able to do all those things, and, umm, to say certain things and do certain things, wear certain things, but I don’t.

(Jessie, St. Mary’s).

Hip hop culture and Black culture are virtually synonymous in this day and age-- to the point that even middle class Blacks who attend elite schools often feel pressure to adopt this particular version of Black culture even though it does not reflect their class location. Oddly enough this pressure is not just put on them by other Blacks; it is also what many Whites students expected.

Andy: One day we had to dress up for this awards assembly thing and I came in with a tie and a dress shirt and everything, and then one of [the White students] came up to me and said, “Oh, you should come in with like the necklace and droop pants and like silky shirts, and like, umm, $300.00 jacket”, you know, things that people typically associate a black person in the United States with, and stuff like that. (Andy, HCD)

As this example illustrates, it’s not just Blacks who can have a narrow vision of what is authentically Black, many White students wanted their Black counterparts to come off as more different from them than they actually were. Middle class Blacks in particular seemed to be
caught between a rock and a hard place in terms of constructing and expressing their Black identity. Dominant Black culture at the moment seems heavily defined by inner city (for want of a better word) “ghetto” culture which they do not readily connect with, yet most were careful not to completely distance themselves from it or else they would be accused of “acting White.”

An exception to this general rule was Sarah, who was the only student in this study who was not interested in being defined as Black at all. Sarah distanced herself from Black people and Black culture because she did not see herself as “ghetto” and did not see the difference between ghetto culture and Black culture.

Michelle: Okay. Well, what are some of the disadvantages, you think, of hanging out with like either an exclusively White group? You talked about the advantages briefly, I think.

Sarah: Umm… disadvantages. I probably don’t get enough, like, Black culture that I should be getting. I know because my mother kind of harps on me about not knowing a lot of stuff… But I guess I’m not getting all the, like, the lingo and stuff like that, and I’m not a big fan of the rappers and such, and I don’t wear Baby Phat, and I don’t wear Rockaway, and I probably couldn’t tell you where I could buy it. And, uh…

Michelle: But what you’re describing to me seems to be its more, sort of, ghetto culture. So, with your middle class location it sort of makes sense to me that you’re not as interested in that. That’s different than Black culture, right?

Sarah: That is different. Umm… clarify.

Michelle: Well, I’m asking you to clarify, because I think that people think that Black culture and ghetto culture are synonymous, but if you’re Black and middle class, then you’re obviously not going to fit into the ghetto culture, so isn’t there more to Black culture than the ghetto… ghettoization that we’re experiencing now?

Sarah: I don’t know, umm…

Michelle: It’s a hard question, I know.

Sarah: Yeah… It’s so influenced, and it seems so ingrained, and whenever… I don’t know. It seems like I’m not, like I don’t get a lot of the… the, I guess, essence of like growing up in a Black neighborhood where you have a really
strong, like, I don’t know, like a fall back on your community sort of structure. Like, that you can always, I don’t know, run over to the neighbor’s house and be like, “Can I hang out here for a while? My parents aren’t home.” Because I definitely probably wouldn’t go to my neighbor’s house and knock on the door and be like, “Hi, Mr. Stein. Can I hang out here?” And we don’t really know our neighbors that well. (Sarah, SCD)

It is interesting that when Sarah is pressed to define Black culture in terms other than “ghetto” she defines it in terms of neighborhood and community structure and again recounts how her experience is different from her perception of the “norm”. Sarah has ingrained in her mind a sense that she’s not a “typical” Black and can readily list all of the ways her experience is different from other Blacks. Contrast that to Andy, also middle class, who rather than rejecting his own sense of connectedness to Black culture simply refuses to define it in such narrow terms.

Michelle: Okay. So what do you think…I don’t know if I’ve asked this question of anybody before, but I’m asking it because of something else you said about being proud of being Black without wanting to be perceived as being ghetto?

Andy: Um-hmm.

Michelle: So, umm, so how do you navigate that? I mean, what do you think of the ghettoization of black culture right now and how do you keep your black culture without tapping into that?

Andy: Well, umm, to me like a lot of Black people in like the community… and a lot of kids at my school, they characterize Black people as like people with droopy pants and like big shirts, and I want to separate myself from that because to me I just don’t believe…

Michelle: You don’t think that’s authentically Black?

Andy: No. No.

Michelle: So what is authentically Black to you?

Andy: I think, umm, authentically Black would be like…just like everybody else. Like a person who wants to take the advantages of life, like take the advantages of education, and I just think that to be authentically black is to like, umm, I guess I could say like blacks in the um early like 1900s, because those people, they knew what they were going through…they were oppressed because of all the Jim Crow Laws and things like that, and so they knew…they had an emphasis. They wanted to achieve success, and so they worked hard. Although, like, the schools were
segregated and stuff like that, they worked hard and they did the best they could. That’s what I think that the Black community should be, like, viewed as. Not as people who droop their pants and things like that… (Andy, HCD)

Whereas Sarah took the “I’m not Black approach” Andy took a “Black’s not that” approach. Whereas she accepted narrow definitions of Blackness and sought to distance herself from other Black people, Andy sought to redefine Blackness in terms that were acceptable to him and defy stereotypes. Sarah’s coping strategy was to attempt to assimilate fully, not just in terms of academics or extracurricular activities but also in terms of the social space and it is this that made her an anomaly among the students in this study. Most felt, as Andy did, that total assimilation was not desirable and not possible.

Michelle: Okay. Do you think…and I think you might be the first person that I’ve asked this question to as well…Do you think it’s possible to be fully assimilated into a school like this when you’re a Black student?

Andy: Umm…I don’t think so, because you’re gonna, you’re gonna be separate from the rest of them because they know because you’re Black and you’re one of the only Black kids here, so to fully assimilate I doubt that would happen. I mean, I just don’t think it would be possible. I don’t know, I don’t think it would be possible. (Andy, HCD)

Michelle: So, umm, thinking about like who the in-crowd and stuff is…

Andy: Um-hmm.

Michelle: Describe that. Who makes up the in-crowd here? And are there black students in that?

Andy: The in-crowd in this school are people who have been here for a long time. Either that, or people who like, umm…or actually no, people who have been here for a long time, and like the longer you’ve been here the more, like, popular. Also, I think what makes up the in-crowd is like the level of like your economic status in the school, like how much money your parents make. So, to me that’s a big one. And I don’t know if there are any Blacks here that fit into that [the high status crowd], because I haven’t been here long enough to, like, actually like observe that, and I really never, like, thought of it that way. But, I don’t know if there are a lot of Black people in the in-crowd.

Even Sarah, admitted that there were cliques not even she had access to.
Sarah: Umm…there are a few cliques that are people who are like the really, really wealthy White people, who you know that, you know, the girl crashed her car, a brand new BMW, but her parents bought her a new one. The places where a lot of Black people probably wouldn’t hang. And I’ve really never seen them talk to a whole lot of Black people. They’ve just stayed with their own other group of rich White people and I doubt that they’d invite [any Blacks] to one of their parties. (Sarah HCD).

Race and class intersect in a major way in terms of creating separation between Blacks and Whites as well as solidarity between Blacks and other Blacks. It actually becomes difficult to analyze exactly which mechanism is more responsible for the separation—class or race. One of the student's in the study, Andy, states that in crowd members are more likely to be people who have attended the school for the longest period of time. Because Hills Country Day does not offer scholarships until high school, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are not likely to attend HCD before then. This class barrier helps to solidify racial separation because most of the Black students are overwhelmingly on scholarships; therefore they do not attend HCD until high school when many of the cliques are already formed. This gives them an added incentive to cleave to one another and be separate from the majority.

Most of the students felt that White students only included them up to a point—that there was an invisible line drawn in the sand especially in terms of being in the “in crowd” which means invitations to a lot of the parties. Consequently, who you “hang out with” in particular, seemed to be the major dividing line between someone who was perceived as acting White versus acting Black. Most Blacks could not (or did not desire to) cross the line. The students who were said to be acting White were usually the same students who (successfully or not) spent the majority of their time interacting almost exclusively with White students trying to cross that line.
Michelle: So I want to know what your criteria is for acting White.

Jamal: Umm, like the way they act, like talk... Like, you never see this person, like certain people, with a Black person at all. They always hang out with the White people. They act like...they start to like...it rubs off on them 'cuz they talk the same. You might see them walking around with their collar popped, or stuff like that...Stuff you wouldn’t see other black people doing. (Jamal, St. Zachary.)

Here’s what another student had to say.

Michelle: So, are there people that...Black people that don’t hang out with any of the other Black students ever?

Carmen: Yeah.

Michelle: Uh, have you ever talked to any of them, and what happens if you have?

Carmen: Well, the ones that I know of, they just... when I’ve spoken to them...like, I don’t really have no reason to talk to them if I’m not in their classes with them, but like if I’ve spoken to them about something, they just act normal, like another White person would. They don’t act Black or anything. (Carmen, SCD)

What is interesting about acting Black versus acting White question is that most of the students -even those who described themselves as somewhat militant- reported having been accused of "acting White" before by Blacks who did not attend their schools. Most of them reported that it was their language pattern, or “talking proper” that made people assume they were trying to act White.

Morris: I mean, ‘cuz people say, like, at least people I know from like public schools, they’ll be like, “Oh, you’re White”. Not like, I’m White, but I talk White or whatever. But, uh, it’s not that you necessarily are becoming White. It’s just that, I mean, when you exclusively interact with White people, it’s like, do you not know where you came from, I guess...I feel like sometimes people might just give in to...give in to like what the majority is, not really struggle to establish yourself, I guess, and just give in to just try to be like them [but not me]. (Morris, St. Zachary).

Morris is trying very hard to distinguish between his version of acting White from the public school kids’ version of acting White. Many of the public school kids he interacts with seem to have accepted the definition of “acting White” that Fordham & Ogbu first described—high
achievement in school and speaking proper English are equated with “acting White” and therefore Morris is seen as fitting the criteria. In Morris’ version, however, a Black person is guilty of “acting White” if he/she desire to be around Whites EXCLUSIVELY. Because Morris actively ebbs and flows between Black and White cultural spaces, he considers himself a code-switcher or a “straddler” not an assimilationist. For him, "acting White" is not about "talking proper" or being a high achiever, it's about Blacks who do NOT prioritize seeking and belonging to a Black cultural space and who would rather secure a place in the dominant White group. Morris is offended when the public school students accuse him of acting White for simply trying to be successful. Morris (and virtually all of the students in this study) sees no contradiction between success in school and being Black.

Because the world is no longer neatly divided into Black and White through a formalized system of segregation, it is now possible for Black students to attend schools only the elite had access to. It is possible for them to live in neighborhoods that only the elite had access to. And it is possible for them to date outside of their race. It is also possible, if not probable that if they do all of these things they will be accused of “acting White” – especially by Blacks who have not had access to the elite environments.

The students in this study however, were more likely to say students were "acting White" when they did not have the ability to “code switch” (Collins 1989, Patillo-McCoy 1999), that is, to be able to successfully navigate both the Black and White world especially through the use of language. They must be able to use both proper English and street vernacular. If a student did not know the latest slang and could not successfully use the lingo— especially with the other teenagers outside of school, they were more likely to be excluded by other Black students.
Michelle: We talked a little bit about how the White girls expected you guys to assimilate, basically. What do the Black girls expect out of you?

Carmen: I think the Black girls expect all of us to be, kind of, friends with both worlds. Because, like in my life, I don’t necessarily get a lot of predominantly Black environment, so I feel like the other girls also may expect us, like, you know, when we’re around our White friends they expect us to, you know, talk White and stuff like that, but when we get around them I guess they expect us to act more Black. (Carmen, HCD)

Jessie, the only biracial student in the study, was happy that she did not feel forced to choose sides but instead was able to cultivate relationships with both the Blacks and Whites at her school.

Jessie: Umm…I’m really proud that I can experience both sides, Black and White, just because I can understand; I can relate to both the sides, you know (Jessie, St. Mary’s).

Most of the students actually strived to be bi-cultural in their dealings with people. Almost all of them placed a great deal of value on being connected with their own culture and also with the majority. They felt that the former was necessary in order for them to have a support system and that the latter was necessary in order to learn how to be successful in “the real world.”

Michelle: Okay. Well, who do you interact with more – the other Black students, or White students, or a combination, and in what context are you having those interactions?

Jay: Oh, well, I’m pretty easy…like, I’m pretty easy to talk to with both groups. I don’t really have set friends, but I’d say I’m more adapted more, I cling more to the Blacks than I do Whites, just because they’re part…like, they’re going through the same thing that I’m going through here. Like the pressures…of representing not just you but your entire culture. So they’re going through that. Plus, they’re going through academics the same way that I am and they’re just…they’re here, and they’re doing what I’m doing. So I say I’m more adapted more, clinging to the Blacks than I would be to the Whites, but I do have a lot of White friends, so I mean, I’m not like, “Okay, that’s a White person. I won’t talk to ‘em.”
Michelle: Well, you discussed some of the advantages of interacting with the Blacks at your school, but what do you think are some potential disadvantages of interacting with other Blacks? And I’m going to ask the same question about White students, too, so…

Jay: Umm…I guess you just miss out on what the whole thing for St. Zachary is about. It’s about being a man for others. Like, if you’re just…if you’re just, like, traditionally with one group, then you miss out on the experiences that you could learn from other groups that are at your school. Umm…I say it’s just missing out on a chance for experience, good or bad, ‘cuz that’s what makes you grow as a person. (Jay, St. Zachary)

This sentiment is echoed by another St. Zachary student.

Jamal: I think for me [going to a predominately White school] it’s been a positive, because from all my other schools, I’ve been going to predominately Black schools, and it’s given me a chance to see the other side of the world from a different picture. So, it’s let me see both words, as if my friends that still go to my old grade school, they’re only seeing what a predominately Black school is like. I get to see what it’s both like, ‘cuz in the real world there’s not really a predominantly Black job and a predominantly White job. You gotta be able to mix and mingle with both types of race (Jamal, St. Zachary).

Most of the students in this study were “straddlers” because they sought a connection to BOTH worlds. Because the students valued being bicultural, hanging out with Whites in itself was not enough to be considered acting White. However, hanging out with Whites exclusively seemed to be the determining factor. Once again Sarah, because she NEVER seeks a culturally Black social space is alienated from her Black schoolmates.

Michelle: Okay. So, do the minority students sort of informally have a support system with each other? If they do, are you a part of that? If not, why not?

Sarah: Um, I mean, there are the…I don’t know, the collection of minority students who, you know, just hang out with the other. You know, they do the same sports, and they eat lunch together, and all that other good stuff.

Michelle: Are you in that clique?

Sarah: I’m kinda not.

Michelle: Why not? I’m not passing judgment…
Sarah: No, umm…they’re just not my really…my close friends…Umm…the majority of my friends are White. …we like the same kind of music, and we do the same sort of, I don’t know fun things. Like there’s a lot of horseback riders, and we do that, and that’s probably it. (Sarah, HCD)

Unlike Sarah, most of the students believed that keeping a connection to both worlds meant that sometimes they needed to retreat to a separate Black social space to cultivate that particular cultural connection. Because the students were vastly outnumbered in their classes and in most of their extracurricular activities many of them felt they needed a “safe space” where they could provide a system of support for one another and encourage social solidarity. Consequently Black students who never used separation as a coping strategy were seen as assimilators who were only interested in the White world.

Michelle: Okay, the Black students who aren’t a part of the Black clique. Why are they out? Is that their choice, or is it the choice of the group, or a combination?

Camille: It’s a combination. I think it might be a little bit of their choice. They don’t realize, like, how that would affect their status in the Black crowd, but if they choose…like say they went to a mostly White school for grade school, and a lot of their friends came here, they’ll probably just continue hanging out with them, even if they’re all White, and so if like the Black girls look at that them they’ll say, “Oh, well. She can have them. You know, we don’t need her.” (Camille St Mary’s)

Camille attests that when a Black student’s inner-most circle is comprised of Whites only, he/she will have an uphill battle trying to connect with other Blacks assuming he/she would even want to try. Jay a student at St. Zachary’s puts it even more bluntly. He contends that total assimilation as a strategy is not only undesirable it is also unhealthy. He questions why a Black student would be unwilling to seek a Black social space.

Michelle: Well, what are some of the disadvantages of hanging out, you know, with the white people at your school? And I’m specifically thinking about the blacks that you are referring to that seem to only exclusively hang out with the whites. What do you think they might be missing by not sitting at the table with you all?
Jay: I think they’re missing a sense of culture. Like, if you sit there and you’re just...if you’re just hanging out with the whites, I mean, you’re kind of denying yourself what you are, a minority. I mean, you’re trying...I think you’re trying too much to be part of the majority. Like, there’s nothing wrong with being a majority or being a minority, but if you are a minority I think that, hey, you should...you should admit to it, and you integrate yourself... but if you’re just exclusively hanging out with the Whites... I just feel that they’re not giving themselves the right...it’s not healthy, I believe...

Michelle: What’s not healthy about it?

Jay: It’s just, if you can’t...if you can’t get involved with your own culture, like, how can you...how can you go to another culture? Like, if you can’t look at who you are and you don’t accept that...I’m not saying they don’t accept that they’re Black, but I just feel that they’re trying too much to not be themselves...if I just hang out with Whites, like, it’s nothing wrong with it, but I’m just saying that if you don’t hang out with any blacks, like, what’s going on? Like, when you come here, you’re initially going to be drawn to the blacks ‘cuz that’s other people that look like you, and they do some things like you...The Whites aren’t going through the same thing that you’re going through. (Jay, St. Zachary)

In the context of these elite schools, whether or not a student sought a separate, Black social space was the main determining factor distinguishing between those who were said to “act White” and those who were said to “act Black”. For these students the separate social space becomes their primary access to Black culture itself. Outside of their families, it is arguably their most important link to other Black people.

The Cafeteria—Yes, “all the Black students are sitting together in the cafeteria”

Much has been made of the so called “self-segregation” of Black students (especially in the cafeteria) which implies they are denying themselves an opportunity to interact with Whites. However the opportunity for interaction is one that Whites themselves might not be extending. I call this phenomenon “the self segregation paradox” meaning that the separation between Blacks and Whites seems to be blamed on Blacks—thus the term self segregation- but the paradox is that the actions of the dominant group seem to go unnoticed and unproblematized even though
they have more power to both create and mitigate the process of racial separation. Jamal from St. Zachary argues the point that Blacks are openly criticized for being cliquish while their White counterparts are not.

Jamal: Umm…I just feel like it’s a…it’s just…when you sit there and look at White people, …like, no one asks why punk rock people sit next to each other, or why the athletes sit next to each other. They always say, “Oh, there’s the minorities again sitting next to each other; they’re trying to exclude themselves from the group.” I mean, we’re just being…we’re just sitting where we’re more comfortable at. So, I mean, if that’s what happens…if that’s the way it goes, that’s the way it goes. I’m not saying that we don’t like White people. It’s just more comfortable with other Black people. That’s all I have to say is like, ‘cuz some… I think some of the coolest people here are punk rock people. Because they’re, I guess you could say, they’re not accepted within the majority, like, the stereotype of healthy Caucasian, stuff like that. I think that’s why they’re cool ‘cuz they can understand you more and they won’t feed you with a stereotype. They’ll just treat you as a person that you are, and when you’re met with, uh, I guess a healthy Caucasian, they’ll look at you as a stereotype instead of just a person, so…I’d say that’s the only thing about it. Like, you’d never hear of why the punk rock people are sitting next to each other, but you always hear why are Blacks sitting next to each other? (Jamal St. Zachary)

Jamal’s point seems to be that White students have more freedom to sit in their various cliques in the cafeteria, whether they are punk rockers or athletes, but Black students are not allowed that same freedom to gather together without being accused of being separatist, even though they spend most of the rest of their school day interacting with Whites. To extend this point even further, I suggest that it’s actually BECAUSE they spend the rest of their school day in classes and extracurricular activities interacting with Whites that they are so instrumental in seeking each other out in the cafeteria. More than any other time of day, lunchtime gives Black students the opportunity to hang together almost exclusively (Tatum 1999). The racial separation at the lunch hour phenomenon happens in high schools, elementary schools and colleges across the country (as well as corporate America). So I asked the students: Just what is it about that cafeteria time that’s so important?
Michelle: Okay. Uh, so you do you interact with more, other Black students or White students? Why and in what context?

Rita: Well, I…let’s see…I usually interact more with the White students, but I eat lunch with the Black students…. [With] the White students since I interact with them more because they’re like out doing more of the things that I’m out doing, like in some of the clubs I’m in or in some of the things I participate in, like sports or something. And like, they’re more out there doing that thing and they’re just there, and with the Black students, I interact with them more because I feel like we have like a bonding that’s like, you can see it… a sister bonding…

Michelle: What happens during the cafeteria time?

Rita: Um, the cafeteria time is the time where you just sit back with your friends, like, cap on each other’s food, like, “Ha-ha, look what you guys got”, like some crazy whacked out stuff, or something like that, and then, like, you just be, like, all this like stuff just comes out and you can just, like, cuss or something, and like you can use like words that you wouldn’t be able to use with, like, your White friends, because if they would say it you would have to get up and, like, do some physical harm to them…

M/R: (Laughs)

Rita: But, like you just, like, hang back…it’s more just like a family reunion sort of thing than if you’re like with your White friends, because with your White friends it’s more like, you’re just hanging out, you know, eating lunch, doing nothing. Just, I don’t know; I guess it’s more family bonding with the Black people and chillaxin’ not like with the White people. (Rita, St. Mary’s)

Michelle: What about your in-school time? When you’re in school, when do you hang out together?

Camille: At lunch, because they’re not in really any of my classes. (Camille, St Mary’s)

Michelle: Why is it important for you to hang out with other Blacks at lunch?

Jessie: Hanging with the Black people helps me to feel more comfortable if I’m in an all-Black environment, ‘cuz I know, I mean, they’re not necessarily the same types of people, I guess you could say. I don’t know how else to put it, but I just feel more comfortable. (Jessie, St. Mary’s)

Michelle: So you’re saying all black kids sit together?

Javin: Um-hmm.
Michelle: Why do you think that is?

Javin: Umm...I don’t know, probably because, you know, it just feels more comfortable that way. (Javin, HCD)

Jay: It’s just more comfortable during lunch time to chill with your friends and just chill with the same people that look like you, and again are like going through the same things that you’re going through.

Michelle: Like a safe space?

Jay: Yeah, it’s safe. But, I’m not saying that being with Whites isn’t. It’s just more comfortable and it’s just more adapting, and we’re just used to it. It’s like, just a way of life. Like, there’s just a...there’s a Black table in the morning and there’s a black table during lunch. So, you sit at those tables. We just do that. It’s just...it’s a tradition, it’s not like...

Michelle: Right.

Jay: It’s like a tradition but that’s just the way it happens. There are a couple of Blacks that don’t sit at the Black table, and they usually don’t hang out with us a lot, but most, for the majority, a lot of the Blacks, when they go in to lunch or they go in to breakfast they’ll usually sit at one table.

Michelle: Now, are there specific kinds of conversations that you have at that table that you don’t have when you’re in other situations?

Jay: Hmm...No, not really. No, I don’t think so. It’s the same conversations, but again it’s just like comfort, who I’m more comfortable with. I’m more comfortable with a Black person than I would be with a white individual. (Jay, St. Zachary).

As evidenced by these examples, most of their answers are similar, with the most popular response being that hanging out with other Blacks at lunch is “more comfortable.”

However, there are a few nuances to be found in their accounts. Jay from St. Zachary calls the Black tables at lunch “a tradition.” In order to be accepted in the Black crowd, sitting at the lunch table becomes a necessary rite of passage that distinguishes the “real” Blacks from those trying to assimilate completely. The cafeteria time can be of the utmost importance to Black
students because it is the primary access they have to one another during the school day. Most of
the Black students are in different grades, different classes, participating in different
extracurricular activities and have fractured contact with one another until the lunch hour. The
Black table exemplifies separation as a coping strategy.

Although the cafeteria time is important, there is evidence to suggest that its importance
can wane over time. Most of the students will continue to value “the Black table” throughout
their high school careers-- however the “Black table” as rite of passage seems to be particularly
important during the first year or so of attending a predominately White school. As students
progress and get to know more people across racial lines, (and after they have already established
themselves as being connected to Black culture), these boundaries can and often do begin to
open up, allowing the students more flexibility in who they sit with—although they almost
always will come back to one another.

Michelle: So, describe the lunch situation to me.

Crystal: Umm…Well, my Freshman and Sophomore year I just went and sat with like
the black table. But now I just…it depends on how I feel or who I gotta talk to,
depending on where I sit at. There’s still the black table. I go there sometimes, but not
every single day. (Crystal, HCD)

Another student echoed these sentiments.

Javin: I personally tend to sit wherever there’s a comfortable seat. It makes no
difference to me. But, at times, I probably, like…there’s sophomores and juniors that are
a little bit more segregated, I think. Like, all the black girls sit at one table with maybe
like one other person, and all the rest are surrounding. But there’s nothing like that in
(12th) grade (Javin, HCD).
By the time most of the students were juniors or seniors, they seemed to relax a bit about cross racial interaction. It could also be the case that by the time their White counterparts had been in school with them for three or more years, there were more willing to be inclusive in ways they seemed not to be in the beginning.

**Parental Pressure**

During the course of the interviews, no questions were directly asked about parents yet many of the students mentioned how tension existed between their own expectations, their parent’s expectations and the school’s expectations. Based on student testimony it appears that many of the parents felt conflicted about sending their children to these elite private schools. On the one hand, they wanted the best possible education for their children but on the other hand they knew their children would be encouraged to totally assimilate to the dominant culture.

Many of the parents worked hard to instill a sense of culture and community in their own child; however those efforts were usually not reinforced at school. Even if they were, the school environment is not conducive to maintaining a link to Black culture at large. Since the main interest of each school is to produce a good student in the image of St Mary’s, St. Zachary or Hills Country Day little to no attention is paid to racial or ethnic differences. The schools basically have a colorblind approach. The parents, in contrast, feel they have the responsibility to teach their children to be color-conscious. They have to impart on them what it means to be a minority in the world. They have to instill in them a sense of history and culture and the value of being different—especially in the face of the schools’ emphasis upon sameness.
The students, therefore, have the rather arduous task of negotiating these very different sets of expectations. Many of them feel very frustrated – feeling as if no matter what they do, some authority figure in their lives will be telling them to do the opposite. If they become clingy with other Black students, the parents are usually happy that they’re cultivating a connection with other Blacks while the schools will often accuse them of self-segregating. If they totally assimilate to the dominant ethos of the school and see no difference between themselves and their White counterparts, the schools would count them as success stories while their parents would be frustrated at their lack of connection to Black people and Black culture.

In addition, while only a few of the students describe themselves as being middle class, those that are have parents who are first generation middle class. Consequently, their parents knew what it was to struggle financially. Almost all of the parents were also part of the civil rights generation so they knew what it was to struggle in a larger sense. They are now raising a generation of kids who for the most part do not understand either of these struggles.

Sarah: Yeah. Like, I want…they want me to be…to understand where my parents came from. My mom grew up in New York. Um…I mean, for a while they lived in, you know, upper class, and then her father died and then a lot of stuff happened. And my father is, you know, straight off the boat from Africa; he is from Zimbabwe. And so he knows what it’s like to be, you know dirt poor, no roads, and stuff like that. And they want me to understand this struggle that happens in the Black community, but I don’t…I don’t understand it because I never grew up with it. And it makes me feel like I should know. And I can tell you all about it…I can tell you what I’ve learned in my history classes… But it’s never going to be the same if I’ve never lived it. (Sarah, HCD)

Sarah who is the only student in the study who wanted to be fully assimilated, feels disconnected from her parents and the cultural connection they are trying to place on her because she has never been in a social environment that has been conducive to giving her that. She lives in a predominately White neighborhood and she has always gone to predominately White
schools. She has never had a Black peer group and has not been instrumental in seeking one. Her parents are frustrated at her lack of connectedness to Black culture. She is frustrated that they just expect her to “get it” and yet gave her a life experience that did not allow her to "get it."

Sarah is an example of someone who has been marginalized by her Black peers because of her lack of connection to other Black people. Her lack of cultural awareness prevents her from understanding (or being understood by) other Black people, even her own parents.

It would be easy to write Sarah off as anomaly but on this particular issue her experience is just an exaggerated version of a conflict that many of the students expressed—the conflict between different cultural expectations; how do you negotiate a middle ground? When is it necessary to choose sides and which side do you pick?

Sarah was not the only student who felt this conflict. Helena, a student at St. Mary’s, initially joined the Black Student Association not because she was interested (although she became president later) but out of pressure from her mother to be involved in “Black activities.”

Helena: Umm…I just feel like I had to because my mom was making me because she’s in the parent group that we have. Umm…I’m really not sure why it’s so important to her, except for… well maybe like when she was in high school she was sort of the same, ‘cuz she’s from south, like rural Kentucky, and there weren’t that many black people that went to her school. And I guess I’m not really sure what her experience with that was, but I guess like after that it was just important to her because she met my dad and he was, like, he lived in Lexington and he had been like in predominantly Black areas his whole life, and he made it important to her.

Michelle: Okay. Well, I still want to get behind that a little bit. I get the feeling that your parents might feel some guilt by depriving you of Black experience, and want to make sure that you have that kind of cultural background.

Helena: Um-hmm… I think they want me to have a perspective that I already have, really.

Michelle: And what is that?
Helena: Just that, to like stick up for myself and to like think outside the box and stuff like that, and not to go along with the crowd and just be comfortable being myself...And, they’ll like buy like history books and stuff for our family, and like complain that our schools don’t have enough about Black history in the curriculum, and things like that. (Helena, St Mary’s)

Helena’s parents went a step beyond Sarah’s in that they not only tried to instill Black culture in their daughter they also tried to instill it in the school. They became involved in the parent organization, and forced her to join the Black student organization. They are trying to supplement the gaps in her Black history knowledge. They are trying to make sure that assimilation for Helena is never more than temporary—that she will always be rooted in her culture of origin.

Consequently, Helena is in a much better position to be a "straddler" or a bridge builder than Sarah. You can only provide a connection to two different worlds if you have invested in each of them. Sarah’s blackness is racial but not cultural. She is frankly a lot more comfortable around Whites than other Blacks and appears to have a hard time fitting into a Black population, even among the “straddlers” at her own school. Helena, on the other hand, can float easily between these groups.

Yet, even Helena has internalized some of the dominant standards she has been exposed to by virtue of attending predominately White schools. Although she is culturally aware and socially accepted by both Blacks and Whites the issue of dating is a particularly contentious one for her. Helena interracially dates almost exclusively and she gets a lot of grief for that especially from her parents.

Michelle: Do you feel like you’re missing out on anything by not having [gone to a predominately Black school]?
Helena: I do. I really do…[Like dating]. My parents…they’re not really keen on that anyway. And, like, I tend to like White guys anyway, and they’re not too happy about that, even though it’s probably their fault as far as what schools I’ve gone to, and like when they’ve let me go out. And, I think, um, most of my being called acting white comes from my parents more so than other students, or peers, or whatever. Because they like…I used to like N-Sync and like boy bands and stuff when I was in grade school… and they were like, “Why is everything you do White?”….Like, I wonder why! (Helena, St. Mary’s)

Helena is an anomaly in many ways. In terms of her tastes in boys, music, and many other teenage preoccupations she is a lot like Sarah whose tastes reflect the dominant (White) standards. Yet where Helena is different is that not only does she interact with the other Black students, she is president of the Black student organization. She is neither unfamiliar with nor disconnected from Black culture the way Sarah is. Given her position Helena could be a powerful bridge builder between the Blacks and Whites at her school and at times she is. But mostly she chooses to marginalize herself by hanging out with the “misfits” rather than engaging in the Black and White politics of her school.

Michelle: Okay, so what is the kind of girls that you hang out with?

Helena: Um, I really…I don’t know…like people who have sort of been picked on more, and are sort of reserved, but not really.

Michelle: Sort of the outcasts?

Helena: Yeah.

Michelle: Or social misfits? For lack of a better term.

Helena: Yeah.

Michelle: You say that with such pride. That’s so cool to me.

Dating

Although most students cited typical teenage pre-occupations such as music, fashion, and lingo as the main cultural spaces that determined “acting Black” or “acting White” one area that
seemed to reflect a tension that also exists in the larger adult world was dating—especially interracial dating. Dating was a particularly contentious topic. For some of the students, interracial dating was not a big deal at all. For others, dating was ultimately a way to express one’s racial identity. Jay, a student at St. Zachary’s has really strong opinions on this subject.

Jay: I don’t talk bad about people who interracially date. I mean, if that’s who they’re more adapted to, then that’s what happens. But, I mean, if they’re just dating white girls, then there’s… then I kind of look at them like, hey, what’s going on? Like, we got too many Black girls here, we got too many different kind of colors for you to sit here… we got light skin, dark skin, you know, brown skin, like… It’s just too many different kinds of Black girls for you to just go strictly white. But, I mean, if they’re…I’m not going to sit there and judge them, but I mean, I kind of question them sometimes, like, Dude, like, Man, what’s going on…but there might be a double standard ‘cuz I mean, I can see, like I look and see a Black guy and a White girl walking down, holding hands, and I think like oh, that just happens. But you see a Black girl and a white dude walking, and you’re like, what, did she get tired of Black guys? (Laughs) You know what I’m saying?

Jay: So, I mean, it doesn’t really matter. I mean, it happens, but I don’t sit here and judge them because of it, but I do kind of question them sometimes, like, why you sitting there going with a White guy, you could have just gone with a Black dude, or why you sitting there going with a White girl when you could go with a Black girl? So, I mean, I do kind of look at it…I mean, I don’t sit there and just judge. I mean, ‘cuz I might one day decide to go interracial, but it won’t be with a white chick… It'd probably be with a Latino chick, you know?

Jay: I mean, there’s nothing wrong with interracial dating, really, but…

Michelle: I’m getting the sense from you that if it’s a…I don’t want to put words in your mouth, but the sense that I’m getting from you is that, you know, if people genuinely like each other that’s one thing, but if they’re just exclusively dating outside their race, you think that there’s a problem?

Jay: That’s…yeah. I mean, there’s nothing wrong with interracial dating. There’s nothing wrong with interracial dating, like, just maybe one or two times in your life. I mean, you gotta experience something different. But, if you’re just interracially dating, then…

Michelle: You think there’s some deficiency, or some lack of acceptance?

Jay: There’s something wrong. Yeah, just like again they’re trying to defeat… they’re trying too much to be part of a different culture. Again, like with the whole sitting at a different table and just hanging out with exclusively White
friends. I can see if you’re just built around that, and then I don’t blame it on them, I blame it on the parents. Because they’re not…I always commend my parents because they put me in private schools my entire life, and they’ve given me the skills and the keys to survive in a White world, which we are in this society, but they’ve also kept me around my culture and they’ve also kept me deeply grounded, and they kept me real with who I am and who my culture is, and I never forget that. So that’s what I commend my parents on. But if you sit there…if your parents are sitting there and they’re just exclusively getting you to, I mean exclusively just commending you and making you just stay…

Michelle: Like the “white is right” mentality?

Jay: Yeah, I mean, if they’re not accepting who they are and they’re passing that on to the children, then that’s kind of difficult. That’s what I think is different.

(Jay St. Zachary)

For Jay, dating Whites in and of itself does not constitute “acting White” but dating Whites exclusively does. Also it’s interesting that the stigma attached to interracial dating seem to only apply to Black/White couples and not Blacks with other minorities—in Jay’s mind you could date a Latina and still ‘keep it real”. While he keeps qualifying that there is nothing wrong with interracial dating, it is obvious that he at least thinks that interracial relationships require an explanation. His account also reveals a double standard when it comes to interracial dating. According to Jay, it’s something that “just happens sometimes” when Black guys do it, but he asks the question “did she get sick of Black guys?” when Black girls do it. Some of the students were much more forthright addressing this double standard.

Morris: The double standard I don’t really believe in it. I mean…

Michelle: You don’t believe there is one or you don’t believe in the one that there is?

Morris: I mean I can see why they would say that. Like, I guess I can…’cuz you don’t see that many Black girls, at least I don’t, see that many Black girls dating White guys. I guess, as far as my parents go, interracial dating is kind of deemed bad, and I guess it would probably be more if the girl was Black and the guy was White. But, I don’t know why it’s like that. I just know that I can see why somebody would…or why they would believe in a double standard. But I don’t believe in it. I say you can date whoever you want. But, umm, as far as like the
White girls and the Black guys, I don’t know why it is. It’s just…I don’t know. Going to a private school like this you tend to meet more White girls ‘cuz there aren’t too many Black girls. But other than that, I don’t know. White girls are just attracted to black guys more, I guess. I don’t know.

Michelle: Well, do you think there are any consequences for people who choose to interrally date, like within the peer group?

Morris: Umm…that depends on what type of atmosphere they’re in. “Cuz like if they’re…

Michelle: In your peer group, I’m talking about now.


The girls in the study definitely felt that there was a double standard with interracial dating. According to them, they faced more frequent and more serious condemnation from family, their own peer group and their Black male counterparts. The boys did not seem to think that interracial dating was a big deal. Even those who stated a preference for dating within their racial location did not exclude the boys who dated interrally. The same could not be said for the girls who felt that there were definite social consequences if they were to date cross racially.

Michelle: Okay. Umm…do you think there’s a double standard as far as interracial dating goes?

Carmen: Yeah, I do. Umm, like, I don’t know, but it seems like at my house, my mom, she says that she doesn’t care, but if I brought home a White guy I don’t think that she would like it that much. And my brother, she…I don’t know like what like conversations between her and him were, but I don’t think it really matters to her that much about him, I mean the girl he would date. (Carmen, SCD)

Another student had this to say.

Michelle: Is it okay to date across racial lines?

Camille: It depends… Like, say you wanted to go with a White guy. It depends on where he goes to school. Like if he goes to St. Zachary or something, it would be like, “You go with him?!?” you know? But if he goes to [a predominately Black public school], you know, he’s fine.
Michelle: So socially Black White guys are acceptable?

Camille: Right.

Michelle: But regular White guys…no?

Camille: Right. It’s just…it’s not common, really.

Michelle: More than it not being common, I just want you to be completely honest. I want to know, is it that it’s not common, or is it that they (the other Black girls) would tear you apart when you got together?

Camille: They’d probably tear you apart (laughs).

Michelle: Thank you. Thank you for just saying it out loud.

Camille: Yeah. (Camille, St. Mary’s)

As Camille very bluntly puts it, interracial dating is enough to make the other Black girls ostracize someone. One small caveat is whether or not the White guy is “socially Black.” In other words, if the White guy is willing or able to connect more than just superficially to Black culture (think Eminem) -- that is usually enough to offset the social stigma of interracial dating and will keep the Black girl from being branded an assimilationist. If however, he’s “just a regular White guy” the Black girl who dates him is much more likely to be branded a “sell-out” or face serious scrutiny from her peers, parents, and Black male counterparts.

Michelle: So, in these groups when you’re around the people that are like you, what are the things that get discussed, and what happens during that interaction?

Carmen: Well, at the last meeting I went to we were talking about how like, umm, the people that we date, like girls only want to date, like, Black guys, and boys want to date…they’ll date anybody. That’s the last thing that we talked about.

Michelle: Okay. Well, I want to hear more about this dating thing since you brought it up. Um, just tell me what that conversation was; I’m curious…in more detail, if you can.

Carmen: Umm…they were saying stuff like girls, the girls who go to private schools would like to date a guy that’s a thug, or whatever. And like the guys,
they would be like, whatever; I’ll date Mary or whatever. They don’t care, as long as it’s a girl, I guess.

Michelle: When you say “Mary”, you mean a white girl basically?

Carmen: Yeah…

Michelle: So you think that Black men have more options as far as dating than Black women do?

Carmen: Yes… Well, me personally, I really, for dating I would rather date a Black guy.

Michelle: Why is that?

Carmen: I don’t…it’s just…I think they look better (Carmen, SCD).

For most of the boys dating did not have a clear connection to their racial identity, just their gender identity.

Jamal: Most of the people that act white usually tend to date white girls only. Yeah, they tend to date white girls only. But, I mean, I don’t have a problem with it either way. I don’t think that who you date should determine how you really act. (Jamal, St. Zachary)

According to Jamal even though the boys who “acted White” tended to interracially date exclusively—they were not excluded from the group based on their dating preferences. For him and most of the boys interviewed, dating was separate from questions of racial identity. Interracial dating in and of itself was not enough to accuse a Black guy of “acting White” because even most of the core group of the boys who “act Black” had interracially dated at one time or another. There is a marked difference between how the boys perceived the situation as opposed to the girls.

Michelle: Is that more challenging to try and date when you’re a Black student in this kind of environment, or have you not had a problem with it?

Andy: I haven’t had a problem with it. A lot of White girls, like, tend to like me because they know who I am, they’re used to me now, so….But, Black girls, they don’t…I don’t know…they tend not to talk to me as much as the White. The
White people are more accepting. They don’t…the Black girls don’t tend to talk to me or want to know me as much, so…

Michelle: Okay. Umm, so has interracial dating been problematic for you at all?

Andy: No, it has not.

Michelle: Okay. Do you think there is a double standard with interracial dating here, as far as it seems like it’s…and I just heard this from another student, but it seems like it’s much more okay for…

Andy: Yeah, it is.

Michelle: …for Black guys to do it than the Black girls? What do you think?

Andy: Yeah, I think so. I think it’s more okay for the Black guys to do it than the Black girls.

Michelle: Why do you think that is?

Andy: Umm…I have no…I could not answer. I do not know. (Andy, SCD)

Most of the girls were not only less likely to date interracially they were also less likely to express an interest in White males in particular. In addition a few of the girls in the study reported that most of the discrimination or overt acts of racism they experienced were at the hands of young White men (the most the boys reported was name calling in a joking manner). This was probably a factor in the discussion of interracial dating since the girls reported more negative interactions with White boys and would therefore be less likely to view them as potential suitors.

Michelle: So, have you ever interracially dated, or has anybody from this school ever asked you out?

Tamika: No. I wouldn’t…there are some White boys that like me, but I don’t…they weren’t…like, I think some White boys are cute, but none of the people here… They’re really not attractive to me, so. And I think it would be just a different experience, ’cuz I’ve never interracially dated, so I think it would be a different…actually, I have, but it was just a mixed boy. So I don’t know if he would count. (Tamika, SCD).
For the girls, dating was definitely implicated in their racial identification as well as who was “in” or “out” of their peer group. For most of them interracial dating was a big no-no and proof positive that they had strayed too far from Black culture. Girls who decided to date interracial were ridiculed and excluded—especially by other Black girls. The girls who did state a preference for interracial dating were usually not a part of “the black clique” and were more likely to be accused of acting White by their peers.

Sarah: There’s probably a lot more racism that I’m not picking up on, that, uh…and there are probably people who are looking at me funny and, I don’t know, ‘cuz I went to the movies with that friend I went to the prom with and we were holding hands, and were walking upstairs and I got some really weird looks, and I probably should, you know, take them as people thinking it’s weird, or people…but, I don’t know, part of me wants to think people don’t like PDA.

Michelle: So do you think that you crossed a boundary that night that you weren’t aware of, or?

Sarah: I’d like to think that there are integrated couples everywhere, so people should just get over it. And, I don’t know, maybe that was just their little bubble that they thought it was weird, like, “Why is he taking a black girl to the movies, blah, blah, blah?” And, it makes me feel, just, get on with your life. I mean, they didn’t say anything. I mean, I got a weird look because I looked back. I don’t know, maybe they didn’t look directly at me. It was just sort of like, they just kind of gazed at our hands, like, “Uh, what’s going on there?” and…I probably just would have thought, “Hey, they’re looking at me weird. I wonder if there’s something on my clothing.” Umm…I don’t know, I guess… (Sarah, HCD)

There were only two girls in the study who actually reported a preference for dating White guys. Sarah, who by her own admission basically did not connect to Black culture or hang out with other Black students and Helena, who attended a predominately White all girls school and had few opportunities to date anyone let alone to find a Black guy specifically.

Michelle: Um, do you feel more comfortable around…at this point in your life do you feel more comfortable around white guys than black guys?

Helena: Um-hmm.
Michelle: Why?

Helena: Because I don’t know many.

Michelle: You don’t know many black guys?

Helena: No. I know like my family, and really that’s it.

Michelle: Are there any Black guys in the circles that you travel in?

Helena: No. At the dances and other social things it’s mostly White guys. (Helena, St. Mary’s).

The girls on the whole were a lot more likely to date outside of their class location than outside of their racial location. Not only did they tend to reject dating non-Black guys, they seemed to be specifically seeking “bad boys” or “thugs”. For a lot of the girls dating became a way for them to express a culturally Black identity.

Michelle: Okay. I want to know if...you were saying how you didn’t think there was any contradiction between being black and being high-achieving. Is that something that the girls that you hang out with look for when they’re looking to date people as well, or no?

Camille: No.

Michelle: Can you explain that to me?

Camille: Well, I guess it might...but, for most, well not most, but some of the people that I hang out with it’s like...some people like to date the bad guys...And even in a personal experience, yeah.

Michelle: Why is that?

Camille: Umm...I just think it’s proving to other people that...hmm...

Michelle: When you date these bad boys, are they along racial lines or across racial lines?

Camille: Along.

Michelle: Okay. So, what is that experience like, you good little Catholic school girls, high-achieving girls, going after these bad boy types?

Camille: Maybe it’s just proving that this is not just who I am. Like I can go with someone that’s just as bad as you are, you know? Like, I don’t have to... like I’m not that boring, or something.
Michelle: So, do you at all perhaps think that dating thugs, umm, is part of how you try to maintain having a “black experience”? Or is that something I’m putting on you?

Camille: That might be some of it… I never looked at it like that before but that’s probably a little of it. (Camille, St Mary's).

This sentiment was echoed by another student.

Michelle: Well, you said much earlier about how there was this perception that girls only wanted to date thugs.

Carmen: Yeah.

Michelle: Tell me a little bit more about that. What’s up with that?

Carmen: Uh, I don’t know. It’s like, I guess like you want a guy that’s like a bad guy or whatever. I don’t know why people think that. It is usually true, though, but, um…hmm…I’m trying to think of my words.

Michelle: Well, take your time. We’ve got plenty of tape here.

Carmen: Umm, I think that girls, like, look for a guy that’s like big and strong or whatever, to protect them I guess you would say, and like a guy, it doesn’t really matter for him. They could like, get like a girl…well, I think guys really want…I don’t know. Um…What am I trying to say?

Michelle: (Laughs) That’s okay. Do you think…well, let me try to help you out a little bit. Do you think that sort of the dominant MTV culture right now is influencing girls’ decisions to date these kind of guys and how do you think that affects you, that image of black people that’s out there versus the kind of black person you are?

Carmen: Umm…yeah, I think that like you want to pick a guy that like looks like what’s popular out right now, and like, what’s seen on TV, like, I think it affects me… (Carmen, HCD).

Dating “bad boys” seemed to serve several purposes for the girls in the study: 1) It allowed the middle class Black girls to take a walk on the wild side and connect to the inner city youth that many of their parents tried to shield them from. To put it bluntly, it gave them “street cred”. 2) It allowed the working class girls to ‘keep it real” and stay connected to the boys from their old schools and/or their neighborhoods and to blunt the criticism that they had somehow
“sold out”. 3) It is also a reflection of the consumer MTV culture which portrays young, Black, inner city males as the most sexually desirable.

**Summary of Part II: How do Black students cope with other Black students?**

For the Black students in these elite, private schools the difference between "acting White" and "acting Black" was basically the difference between total assimilation versus temporary assimilation as a coping strategy. Blacks who rarely or never sought a Black social/cultural space were perceived as "trying to be White," while Blacks who kept visible ties with other Blacks were not perceived as "acting White" even if they assimilated in other contexts. Because most of the students actually strived to be bicultural, integrators or "cultural straddlers," it was widely understood that students must keep a connection to both the Black and White worlds in order to move strategically between them.

For these students, part of moving strategically between both worlds meant the cultivation of a Black social space, a "safe space" (Collins 1990) to construct and express their Black cultural identity. The safe space could be via a diversity group, a seat at the "Black table" in the cafeteria, or a combination as long as it was separate from the White majority. Students who did not seek or value the separate, Black, "safe space" were viewed as rejecting Black culture itself.

There were relatively few gender differences uncovered in this study. Both the young men and the young women reported having friends within and across racial lines—there was no direct evidence of a gendered difference in friendship patterns. However, according to the students, interracial dating was "more okay for boys than for girls." Boys who dated interracial
did so without impunity. Girls who dated interracially, however, could find themselves marginalized with their racial identity being called into question both by Black guys and (perhaps especially) other Black girls.

**CONCLUSION**

While past studies have tried to understand racial interactions in majority white contexts in terms of binary relationships, the findings from this study strongly suggest that such interactions are best viewed as dynamic and evolving coping strategies that are intricately linked to not only the overall context of interaction (elite, white majority schools), but also various situational sub-contexts (e.g., sports, class projects, partying). Assimilation, integration, separation and to a lesser extent even marginalization are all effective tools that can be used by students to adapt to their circumstances. Assimilation in an academic context affords them the opportunity to be successful, however in a social context it is often not a tenable goal. While integration—generally seen as the most desirable strategy—is often difficult to achieve in environments where minorities are vastly outnumbered. Separation is an important strategy for cultivating and maintaining a sense of Black culture and while many school officials and White students discourage it on principle, most of the Black students realize that by not engaging with the Black group they risk being completely ostracized in the long run. Hence, one of the most important findings of this study is that most students simultaneously use a variety of different coping strategies, but they do so in somewhat different combinations for somewhat different reasons. At the center of their negotiations, however, is an overall concern with identity; more specifically, their coping strategies are geared towards reconciling different, and sometimes contradictory, expectations on identity.
Groups are defined as much by who does not belong as who does belong. The identity of each group—but the minority group in particular—can be threatened if the boundaries between them completely collapsed. At times, when participating in a sport for instance, race can be less salient. A temporary collapse of racial boundaries—especially to achieve a common goal—is sometimes both important and necessary. At these times, minority students often assimilate and take on the same behaviors as other students either because the standards of both groups are the same (i.e. a basketball player is a basketball player the same skills are needed no matter what) or because they internalized the majority standards (the extreme nature of these academically competitive schools means that Black or White a student must be super-achieving-- the cream of the crop).

However, it is important to remember the context and the temporary nature of this kind of assimilation. In order for these students to be successful integrators or “straddlers” (Carter, 2005) whether at school or in the larger world they have to keep a connection to both their culture of origin and the dominant culture. Assimilation as a strategy cannot be permanent. For one reason it is usually not possible, the majority group does not allow most minority students complete and total access to their world. For another total assimilation is tantamount to “committing racial suicide” (Marable 2003). In essence, rather than creating a population of potential bridge builders, total assimilation requires that the bridge to one’s culture of origin be burned and replaced with the dominant culture.

What this means more broadly is that many behaviors that may be seen as assimilation on the surface (or total acceptance of dominant culture in lieu of one’s own) are contextual and may actually be methods of “straddling” (Carter 2005). In other words, rather than always trying to
find a middle ground between two different cultures and different expectations, often students will assimilate in some contexts—(for instance on a sports team or academically) and separate in other contexts—(usually socially) and the negotiation of these two strategies is what constitutes straddling.

There are many reasons social separation occurs, but the main three as revealed in this study are: 1) Lack of access to the majority/minority—such as not being invited to parties or being allowed to join specific groups or teams. 2) Lack of interest in the majority/minority (or social closure)—such as when students express no desire to attend parties or social events across racial lines. 3) Preoccupation with one’s own group to such an extent that outsiders are not factored into the equation—such as when students are not purposely excluding the opposite race but are simply not actively including them. For all of these reasons, the terms of most of the school life of Blacks seems to be dictated by the dominant culture. Therefore many of the students feel they must be instrumental in seeking a Black cultural space. When they do, the Black students themselves are often accused of being the sole cause of racial separation which I refer to as the “self segregation paradox” because it obscures the role the dominant group has in maintaining social separation.

However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Black students do not have their own reasons for social separation. Outside of their families, and pop culture, schools and friends are their main conduits for developing and maintaining a Black cultural identity. For these students, the creation of a separate social space is not just an avenue to Black culture--it IS Black culture. Separation is therefore one of the more important coping strategies in a Black student’s arsenal if he/she is to maintain his/her connection to Black culture at large.
Separation seems to be the main strategy for the social space outside of school. The Black students in this study were very interested in spending their "free time" with family, friends and neighbors "outside of school." Because our most intimate connections with people tend to happen intra-racially, the family, friends and neighbors they sought during their free time were overwhelmingly of the same race as themselves.

Even their home lives did not appear to provide an adequate supplement to having a Black peer group. Sarah’s parents, for instance, were frustrated that their daughter did not seem to be getting enough Black culture. Even though she goes to a predominately White school and lives in a predominately White neighborhood they expected her to intuitively foster a cultural connection. Because Sarah does not have (and has not sought) a Black peer group she has not been able to feel a sense of connection to Black culture which has lead her ironically to be more disconnected from her parents—her lone source of Black culture. Sarah is an example of a student who has tried to assimilate totally to White standards and has therefore been marginalized by the Black students. Contrast her experience to Helena whose parents felt her sense of culture slipping away and insisted that she become a part of the Black Student Union at school. They also started a Black parents’ group to ensure the school would be more culturally sensitive. What Helena’s parents seemed to understand (and Sarah’s did not) was that cultural roots thrive in a community setting and culture may not take root without it. Most of the Black students understood the importance of sharing a cultural identity with one another. The Black table becomes the cultural oasis for a minority population to find a place of comfort and solace with one another. An apt (but imperfect) analogy would be how many Americans feel when they travel overseas and are happy to make contact with other Americans. Even if they have little else
in common, the common experience of being a stranger in a strange land is usually enough for instant solidarity.

More intimate connections between people usually happen intra-racially. Interracial dating, therefore, continues to be controversial (although admittedly less controversial than it was for previous generations). Part of the complexity of this issues stems from parental pressure—most of the parents express the desire for their children (especially their girls) to marry other Black people and raise Black children. Yet many of the old boundaries have shifted. This is a generation for whom desegregation is “the norm.” They are no longer bound to the old strict orthodoxy of dating only one another—at least not the boys.

Herein lies the only major gendered difference between the students in this study. For the boys interracial dating was not a big deal—to some it was even a rite of passage. They appeared to have the freedom to date whomever they pleased and it did not suggest any deficiency in their connection to Black culture. The same was not true for the girls. Even by many of the boys own admission interracial dating is “more okay for the Black guys… than the Black girls.” For the girls dating is explicitly linked to their racial identity. Dating a White guy was almost a sure way for a girl to be dubbed “a sell–out” (unless the White boy in question was "socially Black") the same behavior carried no such power for the boys. Conversely, dating “bad boys” became a way for the girls to “keep it real” and affirm their cultural identity on at least three fronts: 1) It gave the middle class Black girls “street credibility”. 2) It allowed the working class girls to “keep it real” and stay connected to the boys from their old schools and/or their neighborhoods and to blunt the criticism that they had somehow “sold out”. 3) It is also a reflection of the consumer MTV culture which portrays young, Black, inner city males as the most sexually desirable.
Finally, “acting White” vs. “acting Black” basically comes down to the difference between total assimilation and temporary assimilation. “Acting White” had little to nothing to do with achievement—at least not to the students who attended the elite schools in question. If these students were likely to be accused of “acting White” at all, it usually came from Black students attending public schools, but it was never really a charge they would level at each other—at least not about academics. For these students “acting White” meant adopting total assimilation as a coping strategy especially in their social lives. Temporary assimilation as a coping strategy was acceptable because the students saw the value of adhering to the schools high standards of academic excellence. It was also acceptable in terms of extracurricular activities where the individual talents of students seemed to matter more than their racial identity (at least within the context of the activity)—playing basketball, football, or being in a choir or a drama club often helped the students to transcend race at least temporarily. Socially, however, assimilation was seen as a deal breaker. Because the students were instrumental in interacting with Whites and assimilating to dominant standards during most parts of their school day, an allegiance to and preservation of a separate, Black social space was their last refuge to express their cultural identity. It was thus perhaps their most important coping strategy.
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