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# Internalized immobility : the intersection of assimilation theory, minority cultures of mobility, and the dilemma of "acting white"

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INTERNALIZED IMMOBILITY:  
THE INTERSECTION OF ASSIMILATION THEORY,  
MINORITY CULTURES OF MOBILITY, AND THE DILEMMA OF  
“ACTING WHITE”

by

Gustavo Agosto-DaFonseca

April 30, 2007

Submitted to the Committee on Undergraduate Honors  
at Baruch College of the City University of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with Honors

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**ABSTRACT**

When marginalized groups are exposed to racism and discrimination by mainstream society, or experience intergenerational immobility as a result of social exclusion and structural marginality, there is a tendency for them to resent the mainstream culture. Marginalized groups display this resentment by juxtaposing the American Dream—the possibility of upward socioeconomic mobility through progressive education and employment—with “acting white.” This idea fosters a sense of guilt for sacrificing individual cultures, or “selling out,” to American “white” culture. This rejection of any behaviors, attitudes or goals ascribed to “acting white” promotes marginality as a tenet of ethnocentric pride and identity.

This thesis applies these ideas to the case of second and third generation Puerto Rican migrants to New York City with a specific focus on the ethnic enclave known as *El Barrio*, or Spanish Harlem. The argument is that the social construction of ethnic identity in a context of intergenerational immobility and an institutionalized culture of poverty leads to oppositional attitudes toward mainstream culture and downward assimilation.

That is, the case of Puerto Ricans in Spanish Harlem shows that some members of an ethnic, migrant community can simultaneously assimilate to American culture while becoming part of the excluded underclass. This outcome, but one of many, is facilitated in a context where the ethnic identity of certain immigrant/ethnic groups is stigmatized by the dominant culture, provoking a reactive, oppositional identity formation among some members of the subordinate, minority culture.

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Many of these issues were already real to me as I came of age as the child of immigrants in Spanish Harlem in the 1980s. However, Professor Henken encouraged me to take a step back from these experiences, critically analyze them in light of past sociological theory and empirical research, and begin to see them as part of a larger historical, cultural, and socioeconomic mosaic that is immigrant America. These courses also challenged me to write effectively, debate and defend my ideas orally, and encouraged me to make these issues and ideas relevant to my own life and personal journey both as a student scholar and as a human being. Without his patience, dedication, and most importantly, the knowledge he imparted to me, this thesis would not have been possible.

I also thank Dr. Glenn Petersen, Professor of Anthropology and International Affairs and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and Dr. Susan Locke, Professor of

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

We can't talk about the choices people have, without talking about the choices people make.  
—Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (2004)

Standing on Manhattan's East Ninety-Sixth Street and Third Avenue, a look south gives the cinematic scene of Carnegie Hill's lavish apartment towers, multiethnic sidewalk restaurants, and luxury cars. Like a portal into another world, a look north toward East Harlem's high-rise housing projects and graffiti-ridden storefronts is less picturesque—a landscape that reinforces a mindset of containment. Low income, high rent, and few jobs are just some of the daily challenges facing families in East Harlem (Van Dyk 1990; Bourgois 1995; Dávila 2000; González 2007).

Prior ethnographic research by Oscar Lewis (1966) and Philippe Bourgois (1995) explores urban poverty in East Harlem within a culture of poverty paradigm, whereas more broadly focused contemporary literature by William Julius Wilson (1998) and Elijah Anderson (1999) analyzes the structural inequality and exclusion that underscores life in America's ghettos. Informed by each of these theoretical and ethnographic traditions, this project seeks to explore the phenomena of downward assimilation and intergenerational immobility within the culture of poverty and oppositional culture paradigms as the downside of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001) and the minority culture of mobility (Neckerman, Carter, and Lee 1999).

I was born East Harlem (El Barrio), New York City in 1983. Both the time and place suggest a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time: a depressing, abandoned inner city ghetto at the dawn of both the AIDS and crack epidemics. A *National Geographic* article

appropriately titled “Growing up in East Harlem” (Van Dyk 1990) gives a perfect description of the world where I grew up:

[50] percent of the people are of Hispanic origin, 49 percent black, a few others of Italian or Asian ancestry. Per capita income hovers around \$4,000. One in seven East Harlem adults is out of work. More than one in three gets some form of public assistance, among the highest welfare rates in the nation. The area has some of the city’s worst crime and one of the nation’s highest school-drop out rates. Drugs and AIDS haunt every man, woman and child who lives here. (P. 54)

After my father passed in 1989 from a terminal disease, my mother raised me alone in East Harlem. Born to a sharecropping family in Brazil’s interior and raised on the streets of Salvador under the flag of an oppressive military regime, my mother had arrived illiterate to the United States in 1967. My brother, who turned sixteen the year our father died, immediately feared that my mother would not manage without him, especially since she was still learning English and acquiring literacy skills and had stopped working after my birth. He feared that he and I would end up in the foster care system, and chose to leave home, quit school, and work full time while living in the company of various women. Although my paternal grandfather offered to raise me in Puerto Rico, I chose to stay with my mother.

Over the next ten years, my mother and I survived on \$600 per month in Survivors’ Benefits, \$90 per month in food stamps, and on earnings from occasional work at below minimum wage<sup>1</sup> that my mother earned from freelance domestic household work. Most of our money went toward the \$450 per month rent, with the remainder covering essential utilities and the tuition at the parochial school that my mother insisted I attend. Despite our limited resources, my mother sent me to parochial school to ensure that I would receive a quality education in a setting that would sustain the values which she taught me at home. She would alternate between

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<sup>1</sup> The 1990 U.S. minimum wage was \$3.80 per hour.



paying the rent and the steep parochial school tuition each month—which often resulted in alternating eviction and expulsion notices.

While my mother made great sacrifices to assure that I would get a solid education, she had little idea of the challenges and pressures I would face as I attempted to “break the cycle” of structural inequality and low expectations that dominated our neighborhood. In fact, as I came of age in Spanish Harlem, my more extreme experiences with racism came not from neighborhood “outsiders” (non-Hispanic whites), but came at the hands of other Latinos, primarily from those within my age and peer group. Throughout my childhood, my Puerto Rican-Brazilian American identity has repeatedly been challenged by my peers, with statements such as, “You sound white;” or, “No offense, but are you white?” More recently one young lady declared, “You’re not a real Puerto Rican” (yet when I asked her who the Governor of Puerto Rico was, she replied, “I don’t know, some white man?”).

This tension was further complicated by how drawn I was to adults. My mother impressed upon me that my peers did not have the best intentions for me, and would simply work collectively toward holding me back from a better future. Even in parochial school, the resistance towards assimilating into mainstream society was a strong force among my Hispanic peers. However, I have always been impressed by teachers and other authority figures, and would always engage them in conversation. The fact that most teachers and authority figures in East Harlem appear to be “white” gave my peers further evidence that I “acted white.” Some children saw this as an attempt to ingratiate myself with teachers, but in reality, they were an extension of the structure that I found at home. These adults were the ones who would recognize and encourage my potential, whereas my peers simply saw someone aligning himself with the opposition.

While many of my peers and classmates seemed to embrace unquestioningly the subculture of East Harlem, I intentionally navigated a different path that would ensure a better future for me while at the same time maintaining the culture, language, and traditions of my dual Brazilian and Puerto Rican heritage. In short, while most of my peers, as well as other youth of the neighborhood, always sported the newest styles of clothing and footwear and seemed to end up with the most girlfriends, I had the hope of a better life.

Needless to say at this point, my choice to focus this research project on the phenomena of downward assimilation and intergenerational immobility within the context of a culture of poverty and oppositional attitudes toward the dominant culture is deeply personal. However, during my formative years as an undergraduate I found myself repeatedly exposed to theoretical explanations and ethnographic descriptions of the many obstacles to upward mobility that seemed to ring true based on my own experiences as a youth in Spanish Harlem. For example, Min Zhou (1997) has noted that in certain contexts, “school achievement is seen as unlikely to lead to upward mobility, and high achievers are seen as sell-outs to oppressive authority” (p. 989). Furthermore, Zhou (1997) argues that when children

[...]trive to meet their parents’ expectations for academic achievement, they are likely to be ostracized as ‘uncool,’ ‘nerdy’ or ‘acting white’ by their American peers in school; if they submit to peer pressure and attempts [sic] to become ‘American,’ on the other hand, they are likely to adopt the cultural ways, including the language and behavior, of the innercity. (P. 989–990).

When I read these lines, a light went on in my head and I wanted to know more. Specifically, I was intrigued to be discovering that what I had thought was only my personal experience seemed to be shared broadly among the immigrant second generation as a generalizable dilemma. There seemed to be two different worlds beckoning me to assimilate and each one exacted its particular costs and promised its own rewards. I was able to stay in school,

get into college, and keep my eyes on the prize of a professional career outside the confines of El Barrio. However, I wanted to know more about why so many of my peers were not able or willing to make it out. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues in the epigraph quoted above, “We can’t talk about the choices people have, without talking about the choices people make” (2004).

As I read more of the literature on the history of assimilation in American life, I discovered that this dilemma was anything but new, even in El Barrio, a neighborhood I had thought had always been Puerto Rican. The diverse ethnic history of the neighborhood and the classic writings of Oscar Lewis and Milton Gordon, among others, made me want to compare classical accounts of assimilation for residents of the inner city with more contemporary ones looking to see if I could come up with an original synthesis. For example, in his now canonical book, *Assimilation in American Life*, Gordon (1964) notes that immigrant families often sought, like my mother, to navigate a path for their children that would encourage their preservation of certain traditions, values, and cultural practices that they saw as *intrinsic* to their ethnic identity (p. 79) and unproblematic given their goal of upward mobility. However, they would also disassociate themselves from those practices they considered negative, “false,” or *extrinsic* to their core ethnic identity. It was the opinion of these immigrants that such *extrinsic* cultural traits, to quote Gordon’s classic if controversial thesis, “constitute [...] a powerful handicap to social mobility and adjustment to the core culture” (p. 79).

## ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS

This thesis begins with an analytical review of the concept of assimilation in a chapter entitled, “Classical Assimilation Theory.” Specifically, I provide an overview of the assimilation models developed by scholars in the mid-twentieth century to describe the path (or paths) taken by the various European racial, religious, and ethnic groups over time as they increasingly came

into contact with dominant groups. The two most representative and canonical accounts of this old style school of assimilation are Robert Park's race relations cycle and straight line assimilation theories (1950) and Gordon's much more nuanced analysis of what he described as a contingent and multi-tiered process. Placing structural assimilation at the center of his analysis, Gordon first differentiated between assimilation as a proscriptive aim (what immigrants *should* do) and assimilation as a descriptive phenomenon (what they *actually* have done), delineating various models including "Anglo conformity" or forced-march assimilation, "melting pot" or synthetic assimilation, and "cultural pluralism" or separate but equal assimilation. Gordon was also the first to understand that assimilation was not necessarily automatic as time went by and argued that while most immigrants and their children experienced cultural assimilation (acculturation), it did not necessarily follow that all would become *structurally* assimilated due both to their rejection by dominant society and to the preferences of some immigrants themselves (1964).

In the third chapter, "Segmented Assimilation," I describe the theoretical literature behind the dilemma of forced choice that I describe above. While multifaceted, the basic contribution of segmented assimilation theory is that it recognizes that assimilation alone is not a recipe for success since there are a variety of different paths and different "Americas" to which immigrants can assimilate. Also, due to the complex interaction of class, color, culture, and context, some immigrant and ethnic groups are able to assimilate effortlessly, while others have to force their way into the mainstream. Still others choose to stake their shot at upward mobility on the preservation of a distinct ethnic identity and the dense community ties that often accompany it. These immigrants can achieve the American dream but often do so on their own terms, using the very preservation of their ethnic and linguistic distinctiveness as a means to their

socioeconomic success. Finally, there have always been those immigrants who consistently experience rejection in their efforts to become full members of the American mainstream. For some of these groups, such rejection can breed resentment and lead to the formation of an oppositional ethnic subculture where success in the mainstream is stigmatized as an ethnic betrayal. In summary, segmented assimilation theory posits that the interaction of class, color, culture, and context has allowed the first two groups to successfully “melt,” while other groups actively resist the process of full assimilation, and still others have been set aside as unworthy of full assimilation (Portes 2000:247).

In the fourth chapter, “Minority Cultures of Mobility,” I highlight one particular variant of segmented assimilation theory first developed by Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999).

Chapter five, “A History of El Barrio – Puerto Ricans in East Harlem,” describes the storied past of East Harlem, beginning with a chronicle of the ethnic succession that has seen many different immigrant groups settle in the area over time. Then I analyze selected works that chronicle the arrival of Puerto Ricans in the area, the decline of a working class immigrant community into a drug and crime-plagued ghetto, and the gentrification processes that are transitioning East Harlem toward becoming a middle-class neighborhood, albeit one with ever fewer long-time Puerto Rican residents still living there. These narratives include the historical experiences of Puerto Ricans in East Harlem, a brief discussion of Oscar Lewis’s culture of poverty thesis (1966), Glazer and Moynihan’s analysis of the decline of East Harlem (1970), selections from Philippe Bourgois’ recent extended ethnography of crack dealers in the neighborhood (1995), as well as selected articles on East Harlem’s development and transformation.

My closing chapter is an effort to synthesize these various theoretical strands and histories. I take from Portes and his colleagues the idea that “not everyone is chosen,” that is, the outcome of the assimilation process is not always a positive one. I take from Neckerman and her colleagues the idea that minority cultures can just as easily be ones of enforced immobility as they are of mobility. Finally, I add to these theories Fordham and Ogbu’s (1986) foundation of oppositional culture theory and ‘acting white,’ and synthesize the theories analyzed in this thesis with the emerging ideas of Harvard economics professor Roland G. Fryer (2005; 2006; Austin-Smith and Fryer 2005; Fryer and Torelli 2006), supplemented by the particularly incisive, if controversial, statements of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., U.S. Senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama, and entertainment personality Bill Cosby.

## CHAPTER 2: CLASSICAL ASSIMILATION THEORY

On the opening page of Milton M. Gordon's classic treatise, *Assimilation in American Life* (1964), he quotes the children's book, *Alice in Wonderland*:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” Alice asks the Cat.  
 “Doesn't that depend,” responds the Cat, “a good deal on where you want to get to?”

Similarly, four questions inform the common but often imprecise term “assimilation”: (1) To what “mainstream” should immigrants assimilate? (2) How deep should their assimilation be? (3) Is assimilation prescriptive of what should be or merely descriptive of what is? And finally, (4) is assimilation necessary in order to achieve the hallowed “American dream” of social mobility and socioeconomic success? This chapter begins by defining this often used but little understood term, assimilation, and then goes on to answer the above questions by reviewing the classical sociological literature on assimilation. Specifically, the first three questions (destination, depth, and prescriptive vs. descriptive) will be dealt with in the present chapter, while the last question (necessity) will be dealt with in the subsequent chapter on segmented assimilation.

Assimilation is the process whereby members of minority ethnic groups, typically immigrants, become “similar” to the dominant group. It is a process of incorporation into the host society, whereby the shedding of historic identities and culture both permits the absorption of newcomers and allows for their gradual adoption of the ways of their new home. Immigration scholars Alba and Nee (2003) have simplified this definition, calling assimilation: “the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences” (p. 10; quoted in Gans 2007:153). Thus, it would follow that the more closely potential immigrants resemble “mainstream” Americans (in terms of race, religion, language, etc.), the easier and more rapid

the process of assimilation. In their own critique of traditional understandings of assimilation, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) have summarized this long-time approach among immigration scholars as one that assumes that the assimilation story was common to all, had an undeniably positive outcome, increased and deepened progressively over time, and was desirable:

Increasing contact over time is expected to end in the gradual merging of foreigners and natives, and the speed of the process depends on how close descendants of immigrants come to resemble the mainstream population. (P. 44)

This “Anglo-conformity” model of assimilation was used at the turn of the nineteenth century to lobby against the immigration of supposedly “unassimilable” Catholics and Jews who came for the first time from Southern and Eastern Europe. Given their distance from the then-dominant American mainstream in terms of culture, religion, language, and “race” (by the standards of the time that drew strict distinctions between Europeans of different “stocks”), Irish and Italian Catholics and Eastern European Jews were considered potentially unfit for full and equal membership as Americans (Jacobsen 1998). Similar arguments are used today against immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean.

However, little attention has been given to defining precisely the mainstream group or core culture to which immigrants should assimilate. Who makes up this supposed “mainstream”? In the past, when the U.S. was more homogenous, the answer was self-evident: The German, Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries would be expected to take on the cultural patterns of the white, middle-class, Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs). Since the 1960s, however, other models of incorporation have roundly challenged this assumption of “Anglo-conformity.” Whereas the Anglo-conformity model demanded the rapid and complete renunciation of ancestral culture in favor of the core culture (think of a pressure cooker), the “melting pot” ideal posited that Americans of different



backgrounds would be “melted into a new race of men,” combining the traits, traditions, habits, and beliefs of all ingredient parts.

Recognizing that the melting pot was not occurring for all groups at the same speed or with the same ease, two new and closely related models were put forth starting in the 1960s that sought to recognize and even celebrate ethnic culture and heritage. Likening American society more to a “salad bowl” than a “melting pot,” these models are known as “cultural pluralism” and “multiculturalism” (Gordon 1964). In short, cultural pluralism seeks to allow for the preservation of ethnic cultures within the context of common citizenship and economic integration, while multiculturalism is the actual effort, especially in the realm of public education, to recognize, celebrate, and even promote various ethnic minority cultures (Glazer 1997). Those who favor these models celebrate diversity as central to America’s identity because they believe the preservation of ethnic heritage is an essential building block for success in America and especially for the psycho-social well-being of the immigrant second generation. In other words, rapid, forced assimilation (the pressure cooker) cuts immigrants off from these positive support systems leaving them vulnerable to downward assimilation.

Those who promote assimilation, however, have pointed out that there are indeed limits to the amount of “difference” that America can assimilate without courting chaos and ethnic conflict. For these assimilationists, a host country should grant the right of cultural differentiation to newcomers, but within a framework of a common responsibility to uphold social and political unity. “The American concept of integration,” writes Gordon (1964), “rests upon a belief in the importance of cultural differentiation within a framework of social unity. Groups have a right to be different so long as that difference does not lead to domination or disunity” (p. 68). Moreover, becoming socially integrated and fully incorporated into the

mainstream would theoretically allow newcomers to exercise full, equal rights as Americans and avoid prejudice and discrimination. Finally, assimilationists believe that granting special rights to immigrants and ethnic minorities only results in the hardening of difference and provokes native resentments. In place of celebrating diversity and plurality as ends in themselves, assimilationists believe America's strength and national unity grows out of its unique, European, Judeo-Christian values of individualism, representative government, the rule of law, and fair play (Gordon 1964; Huntington 2004).

However, scholars have long been aware that interactions among different ethnic groups in a single society have often been characterized by competition for limited resources leading to conflict, eventually crystallizing into one of two overriding models or patterns: assimilation or pluralism (Marger 2006). Assimilation and pluralism are two models of interethnic relations which correspond closely to order and conflict paradigms. Assimilation emphasizes order through a balanced system of interrelated parts through increased interaction with the dominant group, ultimately resulting in the blended incorporation into the dominant group (Marger 2006:99–100). Two very different models of assimilationist societies are Brazil and the United States. Pluralism, often underscored by inequality through patterns of dominance and subordination, is the sustained distance and segregation—either voluntary or involuntary, internally enforced or externally imposed—from the dominant group (pp. 100–101). Canada, Northern Ireland, and apartheid-era South Africa are three countries where different forms of pluralism characterize inter-group relations.

Marger further describes four dimensions of assimilation: cultural, structural, biological, and psychological, with a primary focus on the first two. Cultural assimilation, or acculturation, occurs when an ethnic group adopts the values and cultural characteristics of a dominant group.

By definition, dominant groups influence acculturation through superior power (and often but not always through greater numbers). Further, acculturation proves socially advantageous for some members of the subordinate or minority group through increased access to dominant group resources. When ethnic groups are no longer distinguishable by their members' common behaviors and values, they are culturally assimilated. Acculturation results from ethnic groups adopting dominant group customs and culture. The end process of acculturation is cultural assimilation, where ethnic groups are no longer distinguishable based on values and cultural characteristics (Marger 2006:102).

Structural assimilation is the increasing degree of social contact and interaction with different ethnic groups, often dispersed throughout the society's institutions (Marger 2006:102; Gordon 1964:110). Structural assimilation occurs through various agents of socialization on a binary level: primary, consisting of small informal groups such as family and peer groups; and secondary, consisting of formal, impersonal groups and institutions, such as school, work, and large organizations. Increased interaction with dominant groups either facilitate or inhibit structural assimilation, with intermarriage, club membership, and residential patterns as measures at the primary level and increased access to institutions and eliminated minority status at the secondary level. Further, income, wealth, political capital, and education level are measures of the extent at which minority groups have reached parity with dominant groups (pp. 103–104).

Although cultural and structural assimilation occurs in varying degrees across ethnic groups, there is no assurance that ethnic groups will become fully assimilated. Park's race relations cycle and Gordon's stages of assimilation are prevalent assimilation theories with broad applications which continue to influence assimilation research. Park's race relations cycle

outlines a linear assimilation path following four stages which he considered as progressive and irreversible, applicable to all societies and all immigrant, minority, or ethnic groups within different societies. Competition, often in conflict, follows an ethnic group's initial contact with a dominant group. Park maintains that inevitable accommodations will result from compromise between the groups, but ultimately resulting in the weaker group's assimilation (1950).

Building on the strengths of Park's theoretical cycle, more sophisticated assimilation theories emerged. Milton Gordon's (1964) seven stage assimilation theory is described by Marger (2006) as the "most precise and compelling" of these theories (p. 107). Gordon (1964) describes assimilation as a gradual increase in acculturation, structural assimilation, and intermarriage which may result in identification with the dominant group through diminished prejudice, discrimination, and conflict between groups (p. 71). Contrary to Park's cycle, however, Gordon explains that these stages can be viewed as individual types of assimilation, neither universal nor linear, nor should they be thought of as automatic or sequential stages that naturally follow with the passage of time. In fact, one major innovation of Gordon's approach is that he recognizes the very real possibility that some ethnic groups may remain "stuck" at one or more stage indefinitely as long as structural assimilation is not achieved (Gordon 1964:70–71; Marger 2006:107–108). Further, "groups may become culturally alike [acculturated] yet remain in relatively segregated subsocieties" (Marger 2006:108). In other words, minority groups can successfully assimilate culturally (acculturate) while never achieving structural assimilation, or penetration into primary relationships and participation as equals in the dominant group's networks (schools, clubs, neighborhoods, and so on).

Thus, when seeking to answer the question of how deeply integrated immigrant groups must become for them to be considered "assimilated," Gordon's elaboration of several somewhat

independent stages or sub-processes of assimilation are instructive. In other words, assimilation is a two-way street. The receiving group must welcome the newcomers and be willing to incorporate them, while newcomers have an obligation to join and participate fully in the receiving society. However, the experience of most immigrant and minority groups in U.S. history (especially that of African-Americans, Native-Americans, and some Hispanics and Asians), indicates that the receiving society has repeatedly refused to grant equal rights and full citizenship to all, just as newcomers have often been reluctant to embrace the world beyond the walls of their ethnic enclaves.

It is for this reason that Gordon argues that assimilation is not a one-time change, but a complex process best measured by degrees, involving several interrelated sub-processes, and requiring sustained effort, integrationist attitudes, and engagement on both sides (among members of the host society and the newcomers). For Gordon, assimilation normally begins with cultural assimilation, which he argues is easily, almost effortlessly attained (at least by the second generation). In fact, when most Americans speak of assimilation they really mean acculturation – the adoption of the cultural patterns (dress, language, tastes, etc.) of the host society. However, while this has largely taken place in American society, other, deeper types of structural assimilation have not generally followed it. Groups who have become thoroughly acculturated (culturally assimilated) have not always been able to convert that into structural assimilation, achieving acceptance into the primary groups and institutions of the host society. Gordon (1964) argues that it is only after structural assimilation has been achieved can newcomers expect to reach deeper types of assimilation, including marital, identificational (sharing in a sense of peoplehood), behavior receptional (the absence of discrimination), attitude receptional (the absence of prejudice), and civic assimilation (p. 71; Marger 2006:108).

Thus, when we speak of “the assimilation process,” we are incorrect to focus on acculturation as our primary criteria of measurement; structural assimilation is really the gateway to further, deeper kinds of assimilation. By way of illustration, the U.S. civil rights movement was essentially an effort on the part of African-Americans to achieve civic assimilation and enforce a ban on discrimination. This was necessary because integration or full assimilation into the fabric of American life had been long denied to them even though they were among American society’s original “non-native” residents and despite the fact that they had been granted legal citizenship under the emancipation proclamation in the 1860s. The experience of African-Americans teaches us the lesson that while cultural assimilation is likely to be the first step in the assimilation process for an arriving minority group, it may not lead to that group’s structural assimilation in American society. Indeed, the history of immigration and interethnic relations in the United States teaches us that while acculturation has been overwhelmingly successful, that success “has by no means guaranteed entry of each minority into the primary groups and institutions of the [dominant] white Protestant group” (p. 78). Thus, the key lesson of Gordon’s (1964) now canonical analysis of assimilation can be summarized as follows:

To understand that acculturation without massive structural intermingling at primary group levels has been the dominant motif in the American experience of creating and developing a nation out of diverse peoples is to comprehend the most essential sociological fact of that experience. (P. 114)

While these various models provide detailed overviews, they do not establish a universal standard for assimilation. Marger (2006) lists five factors affecting assimilation, accounting for the influence of the group’s manner and time of entrance, as well as its demographic strengths, cultural similarities, and visibility within the dominant group’s society (pp. 109–111).

Entrance into a new culture can be categorized as voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary entrance is almost always the result of a choice to migrate, whereas involuntary entrance results

from conquests and annexations. In the United States, voluntary European migration has paved the way for rapid assimilation while involuntary immigrants have largely yet to assimilate. Such groups include Native Americans who lost their land and culture to westward expansion, African Americans brought to the United States as slaves, and many early Latin American “immigrants,” such as Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, whose membership in the nation was initially the result of conquest (through the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848) and annexation (through the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the Jones Act of 1917).

Other factors, including an ethnic group’s time of entrance and its demographic factors influence the degree of assimilation. “The more recent a group’s entry into the society, the more resistance there is to its assimilation” (Marger 2006:110). This may be the result of the concentration of ethnic groups in particular geographic areas or in certain occupations which “retard assimilation because the group is better able to retain its cultural ways and resist intrusions of the dominant group” (p. 110).

“Like assimilation, pluralism entails several dimensions and forms. In all cases, however, the retention or even strengthening of differences among ethnic groups is presumed” (Marger 2006:113). Pluralism is the opposite of assimilation, where a set of social processes encourages and preserves group diversity and boundaries within a larger society. It is important to note that pluralism does not suggest an absolute separation from the dominant group, since the pluralist minority group coexists within a larger society through a common political or economic system (p. 114). Cultural pluralism is the preservation of ethnic culture within a shared politico-economic system under the belief that the culture “should be tolerated and protected within a system of political equality” (p. 137). This concept is central to the formation of a multicultural society, where ethnic groups interface with the dominant group in the presence or absence of

conflict. “The presumed goal of [cultural pluralism] is to maintain enough subsocietal separation to guarantee the continuance of the ethnic cultural tradition and the existence of the group [...]” (Gordon 1964:158). Thus, “cultural pluralism was a fact in American society before it became a theory [...]” (Marger 2006:135).

Structural pluralism, an opposing counterpart to structural assimilation, consists of networks of segregated ethnic communities, businesses, churches, and other institutions that may duplicate the dominant group but seek to preserve the group’s culture while minimizing contact with the dominant culture. One U.S. example would be Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), which consist of some of the best higher education institutions in the country.

Both cultural and structural pluralism in a multicultural society manifests in two forms of pluralism: equalitarian and unequalitarian (Marger 2006:114-122). Equalitarian pluralism occurs when groups retain their cultural and structural characteristics while enjoying equal political and economic power (as in Canada), whereas unequalitarian pluralism occurs when a group is forcibly separated from the dominant group and lacks political or economic power (as in apartheid-era South Africa) (p. 114). Gordon (1964) noted that structural pluralism, rather than cultural pluralism, best describes the ethnic makeup of the United States. Gordon insinuates that structural pluralism will become dominant the United States, seeking to eliminate ethnic prejudice and discrimination while limiting conflict despite minimal dominant group interactions (p. 158).

Alba and Nee (1997) acknowledge the criticisms and shortcomings of classical assimilation theory, and address them with modern relevance to extend Gordon’s stages of assimilation. Gordon’s model is limited in assuming a homogenous minority population that



ultimately assimilates into middle-class Anglo-American culture (p. 833). The reality in the United States is that there are many ethnic groups who arrive with a diversity of culture and a wide range of education and skill. In a multiethnic society like the United States, this model does not recognize or address the outcome of multiple ethnic groups assimilating simultaneously, whether in conflict with the dominant group, between minority groups, or with both the dominant group and coexisting minority groups. Further, Gordon discounted the vast geographic and social class disparities across America. For example, an ethnic group living in a metropolitan area will assimilate faster than in a rural area not only from increased contact with the dominant group, but from additional economic opportunities that may encourage assimilation. “What is lacking in Gordon is a more differentiated and syncretic conception of culture and a recognition that American culture was and is more mixed, [...] and that it continues to evolve” (p. 834). Thus, Gordon’s assumption that there was and would always be a single WASP mainstream to which immigrants may or may not assimilate has proven simplistic given the multidirectional assimilationist path of various immigrants in America.

Alba and Nee (1997) broaden the dimensions of Gordon’s account in their discussion of emerging theories that establish residential, or spatial assimilation as an intermediate step toward structural assimilation:

[a]s members of minority groups acculturate and establish themselves in American labor markets, they attempt to leave behind less successful members of their groups and to convert occupational mobility and economic assimilation into residential gain, by “purchasing” residence in places with greater advantages and amenities. This process entails a tendency toward dispersion of minority group members of the ethnic majority and thus desegregation. According to the model, entry into relatively advantaged suburban communities that contain many whites is a key stage in the process. (P. 837)

This phenomenon is notable in East Harlem where spatial segregation is occurring simultaneously with gentrification, creating tensions and interethnic and cross-class conflict.

Alba and Nee (1997) further extend Gordon's theory by exploring socioeconomic assimilation as the intersection of occupational and economic mobility. As previously noted, most immigrant groups arrive in America from modest backgrounds. Socioeconomic assimilation parallels social mobility and gives premise to the "expectation that assimilation and social mobility are inextricably linked" (p. 836). Alba and Nee (1997) distinguish two models of socioeconomic assimilation which add depth to Gordon's stages. The first model evaluates a minority group's socioeconomic standing through measures of education, occupation, and income moving toward parity with the dominant group. Similar to secondary structural assimilation, the second model evaluates a minority group's access to and participation in "institutions such as the labor market and education on the basis of parity with native groups of similar backgrounds" (p. 836).

The distinctions between the two models of socioeconomic assimilation parallel the immigration experiences of the historical Anglo-Euro stock and the newer ethnic groups that have immigrated to the United States over the past forty years. Newer immigrant groups have vast cultural and often physical differences from the dominant culture. The second model allows for evaluating the degree to which ethnic distinctions lose relevance in determining and influencing socioeconomic mobility. The second model has also served as a measure for Portes and Zhou's (1993) segmented assimilation (Alba and Nee 1997:836), which I discuss in detail in the next chapter.

### **CHAPTER 3: CONTEMPORARY ASSIMILATION THEORY: SEGMENTED ASSIMILATION**

Is assimilation desirable to the extent that it is necessary to achieve the storied “American dream” of upward mobility? Can immigrants achieve socioeconomic success while preserving elements of their ethnic heritage, that is, without fully assimilating? On the other hand, is it possible for immigrants and their children to assimilate into American society yet end up no closer to achieving socioeconomic success, remaining marginalized from the mainstream indefinitely (Gans 2007)?

Recent literature on the immigrant second generation (the children of immigrants) has found that “no matter how motivated and ambitious immigrants are, their future prospects will be dim if government officials persecute them, natives consistently discriminate against them, and their own community has only minimum resources to offer” (Portes and Rubaut 2001:49). Added to this list of woes, what if members of an individual’s own community discriminate against them for striving to access resources and opportunities beyond established norms and expectations for the community? This chapter of the thesis investigates the above questions, extending the theoretical discussion begun in the preceding chapter on classical assimilation theory by focusing directly on the concept of segmented assimilation as developed over the past 15 years by immigration scholars such as Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993), Zhou (1997), and Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (2001), among others.

More specifically, this project seeks to discuss downward assimilation and intergenerational immobility within culture of poverty and oppositional culture paradigms as the downside of segmented assimilation and the minority culture of mobility. When marginalized

groups are exposed to racism and prejudice or become frustrated with perceived or demonstrated intergenerational immobility, research has shown that some members of these marginalized groups come to resent the mainstream culture. For example, Portes and Zhou (1993) describe this as leading to “permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass” (p. 82), or what a previous generation of scholars controversially dubbed the “culture of poverty” (Lewis 1966:xlii). Zhou (1997) even describes “the development of an adversarial subculture among those who are trapped in innercity ghettos” in which “minorities have thus reacted to racial oppression by constructing resistance both as conformity...and avoidance” (p. 989).

As opposed to previous theories of assimilation that posited a straight line trajectory into the middle class over a series of generations based on the path of the last major wave of European immigration that ended in the mid-1920s, today’s theories focus on the children of the current wave of immigration that began arriving from all across the globe in the mid-1960s. The basic premise of segmented assimilation theory is that the multiple origins of these immigrants are matched in the second generation by multiple paths of assimilation into American society, not all of which are upward into the middle class. That is, the assimilation process as actually lived in the United States is neither simple, direct, nor inevitable (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:45).

Newcomers are more heterogeneous than ever in terms of their social class origins, age upon arrival, timing and context of arrival, access to human and social capital resources, legal status, and degree of acceptance or rejection from native populations. In this last instance, the wide array of ethnic and racial identities means that like never before one’s ethnicity can be a *choice* for some (situational or symbolic), act as a *strength* for others (a veritable refuge or shelter from the storm of forced acculturation), or become a liability for still others given the persistence of a color line that has long stigmatized non-whites in the United States. At the same

time, American society is stratified as never before into segments that place an ever greater premium on higher education, special skills, and human capital. As a result, assimilation can lead to a number of different outcomes and segmented assimilation theory posits that the members of the immigrant second generation will follow one of three segmented paths (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

In the founding document of this theoretical approach, Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993) delineate the following three trajectories:

One of them replicates the time honored portrayal of growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle class; a second leads straight in the opposite direction to permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass; still a third associates rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and tight solidarity. (P. 82)

Restated, some immigrants may completely assimilate into mainstream Anglo-Euro American culture and integrate into the middle class, promoting intergenerational assimilation as well.

Others assimilate into an alternate American subculture that promotes resistance towards the mainstream, seeing conformity as a betrayal of their cultural identity. Finally, some immigrants acculturate into mainstream American culture, while maintaining their own culture through tapping into strong ties within their ethnic group in the form of membership in ethnic enclaves, ethnic networks, and investment in social capital.

The first path of segmented assimilation mirrors the immigration experiences of what have been labeled the “old” immigration (1840–1880) and the “new” immigration (1880–1920), two sequential waves of immigrants to the United States. Of European origin in their majority, the first wave arrived during the mid-nineteenth century and hailed from northern European places of origin such as Germany and Ireland. The second wave, long referred to by immigration scholars as the “new” immigration since it was indeed the “newest” wave of immigration during

most of the twentieth century, arrived in the U.S. between 1880 and 1920 from southern Europe (Italians) and Eastern Europe (Jews). It was thought that their eventual assimilation and upward socioeconomic mobility in American society was slowed due to their variance from the American mainstream, defined up until then as northern European “stock,” or WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) (Marger 2006). Still, as described in the pervious chapter, the subsequent forty years showed that even these groups were able to successfully assimilate into the American middle class over the course of two to three generations. It is important to note, however, that government policy, societal reception, and structural economic opportunities available to an ethnic group at the time of their arrival greatly influence the pace of incorporation into mainstream American society.

Based on the history of these European immigrant groups, it was long assumed that assimilation was a necessary prerequisite for achieving socioeconomic success. Indeed, the relative success the Irish, Italians, and especially Jews, have had in “making it” in America has been used to prove that assimilation along either Anglo-conformity or melting pot lines (described above) actually took place in the past, enabling those groups to enter the mainstream and achieve socioeconomic success. However, given the varied and not always positive outcomes of the actual assimilation process in American history, many scholars have recently begun to question the absolute necessity of complete assimilation. Since previous “straight-line” models of assimilation were built on the history of the European immigrant experience following massive arrivals between 1840 and 1920, many scholars question their applicability to current immigrants and their children. Still, the general assumption based on past immigrant experience was that assimilation and Americanization over the course of two or three generations would

lead to upward mobility and the “end of ethnicity.” That is, assimilation plus time equals success.

### ***Off the Beaten Path***

Since there was very little immigration into the U.S. between 1920 and 1960, sociologists mistakenly assumed that this straight-line pattern of gradual cultural assimilation enabled immigrants and their children to achieve equal and uniform access to social and economic upward mobility. It was even assumed that this process was “irreversible” and all but “inexorable.” However, the experience of various initially smaller non-white and non-European immigrant/migrant groups in the U.S., especially African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans, seemed to directly contradict these supposedly universal patterns of “positive assimilation,” indicating that there were barriers, sometimes insurmountable ones, to the assimilation of all groups. The experience of Puerto Ricans as non-white arrivals on the east coast, especially in New York City, over the next 30-40 years, gave rise to other theoretical models aimed at explaining their quantitatively different outcome as a group. Moreover, Gans (2007) points out that the economic recessions of the early 1970s and again in the late 1980s, just as many second generation Puerto Ricans were entering young adulthood and many other new immigrants groups were beginning to have children, “may have led researchers to consider the interplay between downward mobility and assimilation” (p. 153). It was in this context that Portes and Zhou’s (1993) foundational analysis of external, structural and internal, cultural obstacles to assimilation and mobility was developed. Essentially, they “argued that in an economy which offered only unskilled jobs to poor second-generation young people, their assimilation could lead to their downward mobility” (Gans 2007:153).

Indeed, early ethnographic research into the lives of Puerto Ricans, often labeled “the underclass” (along with African Americans) by sociologists, revealed what Oscar Lewis famously called “the culture of poverty” (Lewis 1966). This partially explains the fact that Puerto Ricans did not replicate the upwardly mobile “positive assimilation” of previous European immigrant groups because they encountered a structurally distinct labor market where the few remaining working class jobs for newly arrived migrants with few urban, industrial skills did not act as a doorway into the middle class as they had for a previous generation of European working class immigrants. Added to this structural impediment, Puerto Ricans encountered fierce racism and discrimination upon their arrival leading to their social, labor, and residential segregation into the worst jobs and neighborhoods. Subsequently, in response to this structural feature that denied them access to the mainstream, over the course of two or three generations members of some communities developed a fierce resentment against mainstream culture as a way to cope with their plight. Lewis (1966), thus, developed an “oppositional culture theory,” also known as the “culture of poverty”:

[T]he culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individualized, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society. (P. xlv)

In an eerily similar assessment focused now on a particular segment of the second generation of today, Portes and Zhou (1993) describe the spiral into the underclass:

If immigrant parents do not make economic progress at a pace that meets their children’s expectations and gives them hope for further mobility, immigrant children might become discouraged and turn to an oppositional framework to interpret this stalled progress, leading to the second path, incorporation into the underclass. (P. 948)

In a later study, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) elaborate on this line of thought arguing that marginalized groups often develop an oppositional solidarity as a protection against external



discrimination leading many second generation youth in turn to denigrate “schools and their staffs as instruments of racial oppression and [...] education itself as incapable of bettering their situation” (p. 60). Portes and Rumbaut go on to cite a number of qualitative studies that have found that these second and third generation youth often find themselves forced to choose between being ridiculed for disloyalty to their ethnic group by “acting white” and consciously opting not to learn in order to preserve a skewed sense of reactive ethnic identity.

As indicated above, segmented assimilation theory also posits the possibility of a “third way” of immigrant incorporation and adaptation between entering the mainstream while sacrificing one’s ethnicity or developing a reactive, oppositional ethnic identity in the face of structural inequality. In other words, some groups have managed to achieve success not in spite of, but perhaps directly because of their refusal to fully assimilate. For example, the astonishing success of Jewish immigrants and their descendants who entered American society at the turn of the last century, and the much newer group of Cuban exiles, who came as refugees after the 1959 revolution, has been built at least partially on “selective acculturation.” That is, each group has been successful at preserving and passing on a high degree of ethnic cohesion and economic solidarity while at the same time slowly becoming competent and accepted in mainstream institutions. While the Cubans had the added advantage of being officially recognized as “refugees from Communism” with all the attendant benefits of such a designation during the Cold War, they have even achieved the seemingly impossible – “acculturation in reverse”: the transformation of a major American city, Miami, into a place where native whites and blacks have had to take on aspects of Cuban culture in order to be economically and politically successful (Portes and Stepick 1993).

As a result of these anomalies, scholars began to posit a new model of immigrant incorporation called “segmented assimilation.” In sum, this model asserts that “not everyone is chosen.” That is, a complex combination of immigrant characteristics and structural conditions afford some groups opportunities, while other groups are met with insurmountable obstacles. Some of the many variables in this “new math” of assimilation are human and social capital resources (education, skills, and connections), legal status, community solidarity, and the preservation of parental authority. Furthermore, today’s immigrants are met by a post-industrial economic context that places a premium on higher education and the acquisition of marketable skills unlike in the past when a high school diploma and a blue collar job was an immigrant’s ticket out of poverty and into the middle class. On a personal note, while my mother had a very low level of human and social capital (she became literate in the United States and was a Brazilian living in a majority Puerto Rican community), she made up for this by raising me with strong values, while ensuring that her low human capital resources were overcome through my own parochial school education.

## CHAPTER 4: MINORITY CULTURE OF IMMOBILITY

Although segmented assimilation models (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001) account for the racial discrimination and transitioning labor market that second generation immigrants experience, this line of research focuses primarily on poorer ethnic immigrants. Specifically, Portes and Zhou's (1993) linear model assumes that ethnic minorities assimilate following one of three paths, but neglect the possible intersection of those paths. Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) expand Portes and Zhou's research by discussing the responsive negotiation that minority ethnic groups often demonstrate when segmented assimilation paths collide.

The minority culture of mobility is the demonstration and negotiation of responses to distinctive challenges that middle-class and upwardly mobile minorities experience from interracial encounters in public settings and inter-class relations within their own ethnic community (Neckerman et al. 1999:946). Restated, the minority culture of mobility is the demonstrated manifestation of behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs which are adopted in response—and perhaps defense—toward competing expectations of the Anglo-Euro mainstream culture and existing oppositional elements.

Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) illustrate the concept of the minority culture of mobility from literature on the African-American middle class. The minority culture of mobility is especially plausible to upwardly mobile and middle-class African Americans. Whereas immigrants maintain the hope that discrimination will diminish as they become fluent in English and adopt the culture of middle-class Americans, African Americans have experienced a completely different reality (p. 954). Additionally, African Americans face the challenge of

maintaining inter-class coethnic relationships. Although residential and employment differences have broadened class lines between middle-class and poorer African Americans, extended families and deeply rooted kinship traditions among African Americans increase inter-class relations (Anderson 1999; Neckerman et al. 1999).

Middle-class and upwardly mobile minorities face two major challenges: interacting in racially integrated settings while conforming to expected middle-class values and norms, and negotiating inter-class relations in the minority community. The first category arises from increasing contact with the Anglo-Euro (white) American middle and upper-classes which make up the dominant culture of the United States. The negotiation of racial discrimination and glass ceilings “demand for conformity to white middle-class speech patterns and interactional styles in school, work, and other public settings” (p. 950).

The second category of challenges facing middle-class and upwardly mobile minorities and the central focus of this thesis surrounds inter-class relations within their own ethnic group (Neckerman et al. 1999:951). Middle-class and successful, upwardly mobile minorities often live in mixed-class ethnic communities where they are more visible than successful whites, where their success may be viewed with resentment, intimidation, or claims of obligation from less fortunate coethnics (p. 951). This becomes a challenge of living in two worlds, where identity must be negotiated to ensure acceptance. “To manage these inter-class relations, middle-class or upwardly mobile African Americans may ‘switch’ to lower class linguistic styles” (p. 955). Anderson (1999) describes this negotiation as “code switching,” where a person uses discretion in presenting both decent and street-oriented character,<sup>2</sup> depending on the situation. The ability

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<sup>2</sup> Anderson (1999) notes in his ethnographic account that the residents of innercity Philadelphia used the terms “decent” and “street” freely when characterizing individuals and families who attempt to adopt middle-class, mainstream values or who resort to an oppositional culture, respectively (p. 35).

to code-switch is characteristic of middle-class and upwardly mobile minorities (Anderson 1999):

Those strongly associated with the street, who have less exposure to wider society, may have difficulty code-switching; imbued with the code of the street, they either don't know the rules for decent behavior or may see little value in displaying such knowledge. (P. 36)

This ability becomes necessary when operating between middle-class mobility and oppositional frameworks, especially when the oppositional culture rejects the values of the dominant class. In the United States, this often takes form in rejecting the values that are associated and ascribed to middle and upper-class whites (Fordham and Ogbu 1986:185–186; Anderson 1999:313–314; Neckerman et al. 1999:953; Fryer 2006).

Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) build on their analyses of African American inter-class relations to analyze the salience of the minority culture of mobility in immigrants and their descendents (pp. 956–960). They identify three processes that occur in the development of immigrant minority communities: “[the] racialization of identity, movement into the mainstream economy, and class formation within the ethnic community” (p. 956). These processes have results that are typical of the minority culture of mobility: discrimination and isolation outside of the ethnic community and problematic inter-class relations within the co-ethnic community. For example, Latin Americans who immigrate to the United States arrive with a common language, but have cultural, demographic, and economic differences. Despite these differences, the United States has racialized all Latin American immigrants as Hispanic, or *Latino*. Existing ethnic enclave economies and organizations may help to rebuild the lost ethnic identity, diminishing the racialized solidarity into competing ethnic groups. This competition is further compounded by increased class stratification which becomes a possible source of tension within the co-ethnic community. As middle-class and upwardly mobile immigrants experience the same challenges that middle-class Americans face, a minority culture of mobility emerges (p. 957).

Existing literature addresses the dichotomous nature of the minority culture of mobility as experienced by middle-class and upwardly mobile minority groups. In my final two chapters, I will discuss the downside of segmented assimilation and the minority culture of mobility: downward assimilation and minority cultures of immobility.

**CHAPTER 5: A HISTORY OF EL BARRIO – PUERTO RICANS IN EAST HARLEM**

East Harlem, also known as Spanish Harlem or in Spanish simply as *El Barrio* (the neighborhood), is a New York City neighborhood which generally refers to the area bounded by Manhattan's East 96th Street on the south and East 125th Street on the north, and from 5th Avenue on the west to the East River. Since the 1930s the area has become identified as the unofficial capital of Puerto Rican New York. Since that time, Spanish Harlem has taken on much the same geographical, economic, residential, and symbolic value in the lives of migrant Puerto Ricans that prototypical ethnic enclaves like the Lower East Side had for Eastern European Jews, Harlem has had for African-Americans, and Washington Heights has today for Dominicans. However, like these other neighborhoods, the geographical area now ethnically identified as Spanish Harlem (and increasingly marketed as "SpaHa" by real estate agents eager to gentrify the area) has a long history of ethnic succession preceding the arrival en masse of the Puerto Ricans after they were made U.S. citizens by the Jones Act in 1917 (Dávila 2004).

Dutch traders were the first European immigrants to settle in Manhattan following the establishment of Dutch trading posts during the early 1600s and Peter Minuit's subsequent purchase of Manhattan Island from Native Americans in 1626. Modern day East Harlem was named *Hellegat*, or sinkhole, for the bay that forms along the East River's curve, just above 96th Street (Bourgois 1995:55). This part of northern Manhattan became the center of Dutch tobacco cash crops and as such was popular as a bucolic country retreat for wealthy New Yorkers. A little over two-hundred years later, public transportation projects funded by the City of New York began transforming East Harlem. The Harlem Railroad was built in the late 1830s; the Third Avenue Horse Railroad in 1870; the First Avenue trolley in 1880; and ultimately the

Interborough Rapid Transit (IRT) Lexington Avenue subway line which changed New York City and East Harlem forever (p. 56). The construction of these tracks and tunnels brought German and Irish Catholic construction workers to East Harlem. In addition to the convenient and inexpensive access to Manhattan, the Bronx, and parts of Brooklyn, the availability of reliable transportation connected the outer boroughs and was vital to the future development of Manhattan.

With the advent of public transportation, Central and Eastern European Jews began migrating from the overcrowded Lower East Side to the area that would become East Harlem. African Americans, Scandinavians, and Finns migrated to East Harlem simultaneously, with the 1920 Census reporting 27 different nationalities living in the area. Bourgois (1995) notes the early identification of ethnic pluralism: “[s]ocial scientists in those years almost automatically interpreted national and ethnic diversity to be negative, prime moving sociological force: [quoting Tilley], ‘Always, where so many tongues are found, Old-World mores of mothers and fathers temper the New World habits of their boys and...retard their progress’” (p. 56).

The first Italians arrived in the 1880s as replacement labor for striking Irish trolley track layers, and suffered extreme prejudice and discrimination in the competition for jobs and housing (p. 57). “During those first few decades, the Italian new-immigrants were pushed into the dirtiest, poorest avenues closest to the East River, whose banks—where Pleasant Avenue is now located—were described in 1900 as all dumps, broken cars, broken wagons...junkyards, broken bottles, and rags” (p. 58).

Puerto Ricans began arriving in East Harlem in significant numbers in the 1930s and 1940s, replacing Italians and Jews in the garment industry. Many Italians continued to live in the neighborhood as the Puerto Rican population exploded leading to competition over scarce



educational, housing, and employment resources. Thus, Italians and Puerto Ricans found themselves engaged in constant conflict over the next thirty years with the bulk of the violence occurring between opposing street gangs, as highlighted in *West Side Story* (even if that story takes place in what is now the exclusive Upper West Side of Manhattan). Glazer and Moynihan ([1963] 1970) note that there were 500 native Puerto Ricans living in New York City in 1910, 7,000 in 1920, and 45,000 in 1930, and they declare East Harlem both the geographic and symbolic center of this population (p. 91). By 1940, the population of Puerto Ricans living in New York City grew to 70,000 with the Puerto Rican presence in the City remaining steady over through the 1980s, still largely concentrated in East Harlem (p. 93).

Ship passage from Puerto Rico to New York was suspended during World War II, with almost no additional migration to New York until after the war. In 1944, a significant wave of 11,000 Puerto Ricans migrated to East Harlem, with an additional 13,500 arriving in 1945—the year air service was introduced between San Juan and New York—and an astounding 40,000 in 1946 alone. The 1950 census counted 187,000 Puerto Ricans in New York, with another 58,000 second generation Puerto Rican children, bringing the City's total to more than a quarter of a million (p. 93). The apex of this wave of migration was reached in 1953 when 58,500 Puerto Ricans arrived in the City. However, due to worsening economic conditions in the City in the second half of the 1950s, migration began to taper off. Still, due in part to a high birth rate among Puerto Rican families, by 1960 there were between 600,000 and 700,000 persons of Puerto Rican birth or parentage living in the City (p. 94).

As East Harlem became crowded, both Jews and Puerto Ricans demonstrated early signs of spatial assimilation by taking advantage of the IRT subway and moving out of East Harlem into The Bronx (p. 92). Still this new escape valve was not enough to prevent the growth of

interethnic violence. By 1960, East Harlem “was experiencing three-way race riots: African-American versus Italian-American versus Puerto Rican” which culminated in a *Time* magazine editorial declaring East Harlem as “a venomous, crime-ridden slum [...] populated by hordes of Italians, Puerto Ricans, Jews, and Negroes” (Bourgois 1995:61). However, it seems that gang warfare had already peaked in the early 1950s (Gonzalez 2007:88) simultaneous with the peak years of Puerto Rican migration. The decline of El Barrio was at its worst throughout the 1970s and 1980s, where the corner of East 110th Street and Lexington Avenue became an open-air drug market that even police patrols avoided.

Today, East Harlem is rapidly changing, becoming increasingly gentrified with condominiums, luxury apartment buildings, and big box department stores going up rapidly—with the result of making life in East Harlem increasingly expensive. The ongoing debate over gentrification in East Harlem (Dávila 2004) has been highlighted recently in the *New York Times*. One article, entitled, “As East Harlem Changes, Its Accent Starts to Change,” describes the transformation of East Harlem from an impoverished, working class Puerto Rican enclave to a diverse, middle-class influenced neighborhood (Williams and Vega 2007). Williams and Vega note that middle-class professionals are joining working class Mexican and Dominican immigrants, redefining East Harlem’s demographics. “The result is a high degree of angst among many Puerto Ricans who worry they will be unable to prevent their displacement from a neighborhood that is far more than a place to live and work” (p. A29). Although East Harlem has been a central cultural center for Puerto Rican migrants since World War II, increased home ownership and rising city rent continues to lead to the migration of Puerto Ricans to more affordable suburban areas including northeastern Pennsylvania, southwestern Connecticut, and upstate New York.

Another recent *New York Times* article discusses the closing of Saint Francis de Sales School in East Harlem, and the class divisions that have emerged surrounding the fate of the school. Catholic schools have been a “safe haven” for many of El Barrio’s poor and working-class families who struggle to pay over \$3000 per year to ensure that their children receive a quality education in a safe and values-based environment. Although the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York has announced widespread closures of financially troubled churches and schools over the past few years, the closing of St. Francis de Sales School was announced by the Archdiocese at the behest of the sponsoring church’s pastor.<sup>3</sup> Highlighting the pastor’s motives for requesting the school closure, González (2007) quotes a Sunday bulletin distributed last year in which the pastor, Reverend Victor Muzzin wrote that the school “needed to attract a greater variety of people from the area”:

Some parents have to wake up to the realization that they cannot afford Catholic Education. Period. [...]. I see the day in the not distant future when it will become the school of choice for all Catholic parents in the neighborhood who now send their children to prestigious and pricey private schools. Why spend \$25,000 when you can get the same thing for much, much less? (P. B1)

González (2007) notes that “officials at the Archdiocese of New York [...] said they expected the school to reopen in a year, possibly as a more expensive private academy or preschool,” and cites an example of a recently closed Greenwich Village Catholic school which will reopen as a private academy with annual tuition approximately \$25,000 (p. B1). Reverend Muzzin counters that most of the students at St. Francis de Sales are the children of working-class commuting parents who “[...] dump their kids here, but they’re not creating a community. What has changed is that East Harlem is now creating a community. From the dump it was in the ‘90s, now it is a flourishing community” (p. B1).

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<sup>3</sup> In most Roman Catholic schools which are attached to a church parish, the pastor of the sponsoring church maintains financial and managerial oversight over the school. Financial decisions, as well as the appointment and the routine professional evaluation of the school principal, are among the pastor’s responsibilities.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Early ethnographic research into the lives of the underclass revealed a conceptualized framework for a “culture of poverty” (Lewis 1966), later identified as oppositional culture (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Bourgois 1995; Fryer 2006). Chronicling the migration of Puerto Ricans to New York City during the 1950s and 1960s, anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1966) augmented his previous research by conceptualizing the theory of the “culture of poverty” in *La Vida*. Lewis defines the culture of poverty as

[...] both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position in a class-stratified, highly individualized, capitalistic society. It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society where people living on the margins of a rapidly changing society are alienated from it. (P. xlv).

In this work, Lewis conducted a longitudinal study in the form of an ethnographic biography in which he follows the lives of the Ríos family as they migrate from *Barriada la Perla*<sup>4</sup> (The Pearl) in San Juan, Puerto Rico to the South Bronx, approximately two miles from East Harlem. The Ríos family left Puerto Rico for better lives in New York City. However, through four generations, the Ríos family failed to rise above their dire poverty. Their migration did nothing more for them than transplant them from one notorious slum to another – but this time around they would be ethnic minorities with low educational levels and limited language skills living in an increasingly post-industrial economy within one of the richest and most expensive cities on earth.

Lewis establishes the psychological devastation and the denigrating effects of the culture of poverty immediately in the introduction to his study. He attributes the intergenerational immobility that he finds exemplified by the Ríos family to the idea that:

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis refers to *Barriada la Perla* as “*La Esmeralda*” in *La Vida*.

[o]nce it comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture and are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities which may occur in their lifetime. (P. xlv)

Although the culture of poverty thesis sounds simplistic if not embedded within a structural argument about the larger socioeconomic context in which individuals and especially ethnic minorities are situated, Lewis's observation of its manifestation in children proves central to the inner-city adolescent development of the second and subsequent generations.

Earlier in this thesis, I discussed code switching as a survival mechanism whereby middle-class and upwardly mobile minorities negotiate both “decent” and “street”-oriented characteristics, depending on the situation. Nearly fifteen years after Fordham and Ogbu's discussion of this phenomena, Elijah Anderson (1999) conducted a groundbreaking ethnography of life in inner-city Philadelphia. Anderson's study describes survival there as a campaign for respect, where an overarching “code of the street,” or set of informal rules, governs interpersonal relations especially among adolescent males (p. 33). The street becomes the common ground that both “decent” and “street” families must navigate, where a “code of the street” structures options and decisions in interpersonal interaction and in the minute outcomes of everyday life.

Anderson (1999) observes that decent families maintain consciousness and hope for the future (p. 37). “Decent families tend to accept mainstream values more fully than street families, and they attempt to instill them in their children” (p. 38). In a similar vein, Lewis (1966) wrote that “when the poor become class-conscious [...] or when they adopt an internationalist outlook on the world, they are no longer part of the culture of poverty, although they may still be desperately poor” (p. xlvi). Although Anderson describes decent families as having a strong male presence that sets the tone for the family, he also recognizes the efforts of “the decent single mother” (pp. 42–45) who “must work even harder to neutralize the draw of the street” (p.

42). “Decent” single mothers are, perhaps, under enormous pressure to be ever-vigilant, as was clearly the case with my own mother after the death of my father.

In direct contrast to decent families, street families “often show a lack of consideration for other people and have a rather superficial sense of family and community” (p. 45). Moreover, street families are characterized by a disorganized mismanagement of financial priorities, where clothing, jewelry, and in some cases, alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs, are sometimes weighed against food, housing, and utility bills (p. 45). The values of street families are further challenged by the idea that growing up in the street unsupervised forces the children to “grow up hard” (p. 49). These children quickly learn to use violence to defend themselves, and have “learned the first lesson of the streets: you cannot take survival itself, let alone respect, for granted; you have to fight for your place in the world” (p. 49). In short, they have learned to live by a code that ensures their survival in a chaotic, violent, and marginalized setting: you can only get respect by taking it away from someone else. However, a code that is functional, even essential in one setting quickly becomes dysfunctional outside the boundaries of the inner-city. Indeed, adhering to such a code elsewhere only ensures one’s continued marginalization, since such “hard” behavior is seen as proof of one’s lack of decent values, further condemning the individual to the confines of the urban ghetto in the eyes of the mainstream. What is worse is the fact that the most vehement enforcers of the impermeable boundaries of this world are the very individuals who find themselves trapped within its walls.

Similarly, in his ethnographic study of a group of young Puerto Rican crack cocaine dealers, Bourgois (1995) describes street culture in East Harlem:

[T]he anguish of growing up poor in the richest city in the world is compounded by the cultural assault that El Barrio youths often face when they venture out of their neighborhood. This has spawned [...] “inner-city street culture”: a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols modes of interaction, value, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to

exclusion from mainstream society. Street culture offers an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity. [...]. [T]he concentration of socially marginalized populations into politically and ecologically isolated inner-city enclaves has formented [sic] an especially explosive cultural creativity that is in defiance of racism and economic marginalization. This “street culture of resistance” is not a coherent, conscious universe of political oppression, but, rather, a spontaneous set of rebellious practices that in the long run have emerged as an oppositional style. (P. 8)

Similar to the situation described by Anderson in Philadelphia, the violent and often illegal survival and coping strategies employed by those embedded in street culture only lead in the long run to self-destructive outcomes. “Contradictorily,” writes Bourgois (1995), “the street culture of resistance is predicated on the destruction of its participants and the community harboring them.” That is, “although street culture emerges out of a personal search for dignity [respect] and a rejection of racism and subjugation, it ultimately becomes an active agent in personal degradation and community ruin” (p. 9).

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Go into any inner city neighborhood, and folks will tell you that government alone can't teach kids to learn—they know that parents have to parent, that children can't achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.<sup>5</sup>

—Barack Obama, Keynote Address, Democratic National Convention (2004:448)

There is a time, ladies and gentlemen, when we have to turn the mirror around.

—Bill Cosby, Address to the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition (Morano 2004)

So, what happens when these “decent” and “street” worlds collide? Above, I discuss the minority culture of mobility (Neckerman et al. 1999) as a mechanism for negotiation between interracial encounters in public settings and interclass relations within the minority community where an oppositional culture may present the need to “code switch.” I propose that the downside of segmented assimilation and the minority culture of mobility is a minority culture of immobility.

Anderson (1999) describes adolescence as a “critical period of flux” where a child is confronted with the hierarchy of street culture and “can go either way—decent or street” (p. 67). “Typically, in the inner-city poor neighborhood, by the age of ten, children from decent and street-oriented families alike are mingling on the neighborhood streets and figuring out their identities” (p. 68). In an environment where manhood is distinguished through physicality and ruthlessness, children learn quickly to eschew the values they learned at home and internalize the code of the street as a means of survival.

Both Bourgois (1995) and Anderson (1999) describe the demand for “respect” as a central tenet of innercity life. Further, they both describe schools as safe, neutral staging areas

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<sup>5</sup> Also quoted in Fryer (2006).



from where the campaign for respect begins and where survival tactics evolve. Anderson (1999) makes a distinction, where “decent” children learn to “code switch” and “street children” become committed to street life (p. 93). “In this situation, the school becomes transformed into the most profound sense into a staging ground for the streets, a place where people come to present themselves, to represent where they come from, and to stay even with or to dominate their peers” (p. 94).

This dilemma has recently entered the “national consciousness, perhaps even its conscience” (Fryer 2006:53), after two prominent African-American leaders, U.S. Senator and presidential candidate Barack Obama and entertainment personality Bill Cosby, called Blacks to task for propagating the “slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white” (Obama 2004:228), as cited in the epigraphs above. Recently revisited, defined, and analyzed by various scholars, the phenomenon known popularly as “acting white,” says Harvard economist Roland Fryer “was once a label used by scholars, writing in obscure journals, to characterize academically inclined, but allegedly snobbish, minority students who were shunned by their peers” (p. 53). However, Fryer more specifically defines this phenomenon as “a set of social interactions in which minority adolescents who get good grades in school enjoy less social popularity than white students who do well academically” (p. 53). In other words, the term exposes a supposed double standard where, unlike their white counterparts, black youths must sacrifice their standing with their peers (their popularity) if they want to succeed academically.

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) were perhaps the first to identify the presence of oppositional culture in school where “some segments of the [African American] community [maintain] a kind of orientation which defines academic learning in school as ‘acting white,’ and academic success as the prerogative of white Americans” (p. 177). They describe this orientation as a “perfect

storm” of mainstream refusal to acknowledge and recognize African American intellectual achievement and the internalization of those doubts by African Americans themselves. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) propose that discrimination and glass ceilings manifest “a feeling of impotence and a lack of self-confidence that they can compete successfully in matters considered traditionally as white people’s domain [...]” (p. 179). These feelings may encourage African Americans to question the value of schooling, and may further encourage them to develop “attitudes, perceptions, behaviors, and competencies that are not necessarily congruent with those required to do well in school” (p. 179).

Though it focuses on the development and consequences of an innercity street culture, this literature also recognizes the powerful legacy of racial discrimination and inequality as the basis for members of some ethnic groups to adopt an oppositional identity where they perceive Anglo-Euro Americans to be an enduring oppressive force (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Portes and Zhou 1993; Bourgois 1995; Anderson 1999; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Fryer 2006). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) propose that minorities who internalize these beliefs also form an oppositional culture form of reference which provides a framework for structured barriers between them and the dominant mainstream culture. In their study, African Americans who have adopted this frame of reference also adopt other symbols and interactional styles to protect themselves from falling within a white cultural frame of reference, or “acting white” (p. 181).

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) cite qualitative data from previous study and identify that

[a]mong the attitudes and behaviors that black students at Capital High identify as “acting white” and therefore unacceptable are: (1) speaking standard English; (2) listening to white music and white radio stations; (3) going to the opera or ballet; (4) spending a lot of time in the library studying; (5) working hard to get good grades in school; (6) getting good grades in school [...]; (7) going to the Smithsonian; (8) going to a Rolling Stones concert [...]; (9) doing volunteer work; (10) going camping, hiking, or mountain climbing; (11) having cocktails at a cocktail party; (12) going to a symphony orchestra concert; (13) having a party with no music; (14) listening to classical music; (15) being on time; (16) reading and writing

poetry; and (17) putting on “airs.” This list is not exhaustive, but indicates the kinds of attitudes and behaviors likely to be negatively sanctioned and therefore avoided by a large number of students. (P. 186)

Further, the study notes that African American students who choose to focus on their studies and pursue academic success “are perceived by their peers as ‘being kind of white’ and therefore not truly [African American]” (p. 186). The ethnography of Capital High School concludes that avoidance and minimal participation in academics emerges as the main strategy for coping with the burden of acting white. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) conclude that “[African American] children’s general perception that academic pursuit is ‘acting white’ is learned in the black community” (p. 203).

Just as Fordham and Ogbu (1986) demonstrate that the presence of such oppositional culture degrades African American academic performance, Anderson (1999) establishes that this frame of reference denigrates the academic institution as a whole:

Since their efforts to achieve upward mobility tend to be viewed as “disrespecting” their own community, decent people, particularly children, must often struggle to advance themselves. In fact, [...] street oriented people can be said at times to mount a policing effort to keep their decent counterparts from “selling out” or “acting white,” that is, from leaving the community for one of higher social economic status. This retaliation, which can sometimes be violent, against the upwardly mobile points to the deep alienation present in parts of the inner-city community. Many residents therefore work to maintain status quo, and so the individual who tries to excel usually has a great deal to overcome. (P. 65)

Thus, my aim is to bring together the literatures surrounding the phenomenon of “acting white” (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Fryer 2006), with the literature on assimilation (Gordon 1964; Alba and Nee 2004) and segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001) to understand better and explain the phenomena of downward assimilation and the development of a minority culture of immobility.

That is, when marginalized groups are exposed to racism and discrimination by mainstream society, or experience intergenerational immobility as a result of social exclusion

and the lack of structural economic opportunities, there is a tendency to resent the mainstream culture. Marginalized groups display this resentment by juxtaposing the American Dream—the possibility of upward socioeconomic mobility through progressive education and employment—with “acting white.” This idea fosters a sense of guilt for sacrificing individual cultures, or “selling out,” for American “white” culture. This rejection of any behaviors, attitudes or goals ascribed to “acting white” promotes marginality as a tenet of ethnocentric pride and identity, leaving the individuals trapped in a self-destructive vicious cycle of self-enforced marginality.

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