Black On Both Sides: An Examination of Race and Class in the Ghetto Mecca

Jonathan P. Grant

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BLACK ON BOTH SIDES: AN EXAMINATION OF RACE AND CLASS IN THE GHETTO

MECCA

by

JONATHAN GRANT

Under the Direction of Rosalind Chou, PhD
ABSTRACT

From Spike Lee’s *School Daze* to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, mainstream entertainment has portrayed Atlanta as a “black mecca,” largely due to its consortium of black colleges, expansion of minority-owned businesses and growing black middle class. This title is called into question with research showing that Atlanta maintains high levels of poverty and income inequality. While a disproportionate number of blacks in Atlanta and the United States live below the poverty line, 75 percent of blacks in the U.S. report income above the poverty line. However, most research on African Americans emphasizes disadvantaged communities and many stories of the black middle class go unheard. Also, with 57 percent of blacks residing in the south, it is important that research includes stories of minorities across classes in urban southern cities such as Atlanta and its metro area. This study uses thirty-four in-depth unstructured interviews to explore the ways race and class intersects to help black Atlanta MSA residents form ideas of blackness, class identity, and the city as a “black mecca.”

Research conclusions address the various racial identifiers that exist along gender lines. While black women understand race through experiences related to hair; black men’s interaction with the police are often their first encounter with the meaning of race. This study also examines the way blacks can internalize and reinforce systemic racist ideas and stereotypes perpetuated by whites. Results also show the variances between Atlanta natives and transplants and their perspective on the city as a black mecca, the identity boundaries that exist between working and middle class blacks in Atlanta, as well as the way the city’s social institutions can promote black progression, while simultaneously reinforcing class divisions and inequality. This research gives voice to the specific social concerns of black citizens across class categories. In addition, conclusions advance race and urban scholarship by exploring the significance of race in
a black metropolis and class relationships within racial groups. Lastly, findings from this study highlight experiences of a growing, yet largely under-researched population---the black middle class in the South.

INDEX WORDS: Race, Class, Atlanta, Black Mecca, Urban, Gender
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by

JONATHAN GRANT

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences

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DEDICATION

All praises due to the Most High, Black Jesus and the Spirit of my ancestors. I would like to dedicate this work to my family, friends and mentors. First and foremost, Sarah Grant for rocking with me from the very beginning. Leonard and Wanda Grant for instilling in me the character traits and work ethic needed to reach this point in my life. Shout out to all of my family and friends who have supported me during this journey. Also, love to my mentors who have and continue to be a guiding light for me. Lastly, I have to thank my daughter Jael for being the main reason why I keep it pushin. This research is dedicated to you all.
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In this section, I would like to acknowledge all of the participants in this study. Thank you for sharing your stories with me. My hope is that through your experiences, the city of Atlanta and ultimately the world will become a more equal and just place to live.
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1 INTRODUCTION: MYINTROTOLETUKNOW

Past scholarship shows us that middle and working-class blacks share many of the same experiences, social institutions and neighborhoods (Patillo 1999). Conversely, significant focus is usually placed on each class and their separate experiences, thus perpetuating the identity boundaries that continue to keep these two class groups divided. My research is significant because it focuses on the interdependent bond between classes and the way in which both groups interact, understand, depend on and relate to each other. This study also sheds light on in-group division and helps scholars understand the way structural inequality can help shape racist attitudes that are later internalized and perpetuated by victims of racism. While much race literature explores white on non-white racism (Feagin and Sikes 1994, Bonilla-Silva 2003, Fredrickson 2015) and the systemic barriers that keep blacks at a disadvantage, limited attention is given to the way in-group color and class division, initiated by structural inequality and white supremacy, can help intensify racial and class inequality.

Previous sociological research on race, class and identity has been explored in cities that are either majority white or largely controlled by whites (Patillo 1999, Lacy 2007, Robinson 2014). This is the first study of its kind to take place in Atlanta. Atlanta is the only city in the United States with the longest tradition of black political leaders, the largest consortium of black educational institutions and a record number of black-owned businesses in a single area. In the past, some scholars have agreed that the solution to racism and racialized poverty was to provide quality education to minorities and place blacks in positions of power (DuBois 1903, Lang 2009). Atlanta is an example of these solutions with the largest consortium of black colleges in the world and the longest tradition of black mayors of any major city in the United States. While Atlanta boasts racial progress in the educational and political arenas, it remains one of the most
economically unequal cities in the country. Large levels of concentrated poverty plague the inner city and can be found in close proximity to very rich and affluent neighborhoods. In this study, I address the following research questions:

How do blacks across social identities (class, gender, region, etc.) understand and negotiate race and racism?

In what ways do these negotiation strategies reinforce intraracial divisions and perpetuate internalized racism?

Do blacks across class categories in Atlanta and the metro area view their city as a Black Mecca and what are the reasons for these views?

How are the boundaries of black identity reshaped and challenged in the urban South?

How do city politics, institutions and leaders influence race and class inequality in Atlanta?

Later in this chapter, I further explain the way scholarship has addressed the issue of race, class and identity in urban cities. I also describe how much of the sociological research has overlooked the interconnection between the black working and middle class. However, scholarship is not the only place that appears to ignore the interrelationship between working and middle-class blacks. Consider these examples from popular culture.

From Spike Lee’s School Daze to The Real Housewives of Atlanta, mainstream media and entertainment have portrayed the city of Atlanta as a “Black Mecca.” This title has been applied to the city because of its consortium of black colleges (Atlanta University Center), large number of minority-owned businesses and growing black middle class. In shows like The Real Housewives of Atlanta, the main characters are typically middle-class blacks who drive nice cars, live in big homes, and frequent high-end restaurants. Most of the people they interact with
are black professionals who would also be described as middle class. In the movie School Daze, director Spike Lee explores the lives of black college students in Atlanta and the way race and class intersect to help shape their experiences. The hit show, A Different World, continued this conversation by displaying the varied racialized experiences of college students from affluent black families (Whitley and Denise) to middle and working-class black families (Kim and Dwayne). Although the show takes place at a fictional institution named Hillman in Virginia, much of the story is centered on actual black college life in Atlanta (start here). During one famous episode, a character named Picollo (played by Tupac Shakur) leaves Baltimore to visit his friend Lena James (played by Jada Pinkett) on Hillman’s campus. Picollo brings Lena’s friends from the “old neighborhood” to her dorm room and they start to talk loud, party, fight and display behaviors that are stereotypically applied to poor, ghetto blacks. Lena finds it hard to create relationships with her new middle-class “educated” friends in college, while still remaining loyal to her old friends from “the hood.” This conflict in identity construction is integral to the experiences of middle-class blacks in Atlanta and should be explored on shows that depict African-American life. However, episodes like the one previously described were few and far between during the six seasons A Different World was on television. Although it was a groundbreaking show that introduced fans to a new portrayal of black life, most of the episodes still presented a very biased and isolated view of race and class. While the students at Hillman came from various economic backgrounds, there were few examples of interaction and relationship building between poor, working and middle-class blacks on and around the college campus (start here—this may not be true).

Today’s black shows portray a much more complex view of race and class. A New York Times article entitled, “What TV says about Race and Money” states that new shows are
exploring the issue of black downward mobility within economic classes. Although shows like black-ish and Insecure tell stories of college-educated, middle-class African Americans, they are exceptions because they also reveal how this economic success is not intergenerational and current trends of unemployment and economic instability make the new black middle class vulnerable to downward mobility. In 2016, the hit show Atlanta received high accolades and two Golden Globes for its portrayal of life in this “Black Mecca.” The show explores the everyday life of two young men in Atlanta who are trying to become successful in the hip hop industry. Earnest, the main character recently dropped out of Princeton University after one year and lives in a storage unit. He manages the rap career of his cousin who lives in a low-income neighborhood and sells marijuana to make money. The mother of Earnest’s child lives in a low to moderate-income neighborhood, but was raised by her upper middle-class black mother and white father. This less isolated and more symbiotic relationship between the black working and middle class in Atlanta is less visible in entertainment and research. TV shows and movies that tell stories of Atlanta may often display the side commonly referred to as the Black Mecca (Real Housewives of Atlanta, Love and Hip Hop Atlanta), Atlanta hip hop music shows a much more dangerous, gritty and ghettoized version of the city. A recent genre of hip hop called “trap music” has been used to tell stories of drug dealers, gang affiliations and criminal activity that is rampant in Atlanta ghettos. Rarely in entertainment and academia do we see continual interaction, relationship building and even boundary negotiation between these two groups. Issa Rae, writer of the hit show Insecure, mentioned this phenomenon. She states, “This isn’t a show exclusively about, like, the struggle of being black…It’s just regular black people living life….Yes, there’s poverty there, there are gang members there, but there’s also affluence, there’s middle class, and everybody meshes together.”
In addition to various forms of entertainment, much scholarship also fails to show the interaction of blacks between classes. Much of the previous research on African Americans explores the poor, with most of the attention focused on the negative aspect of ghetto communities (Wilson 1987; Anderson 2000; Alexander 2010). This overindulgence in poverty research gives a false illusion about many black communities. In turns, these myths have been accepted and perpetuated by the country’s political leaders. In 2017, Civil Rights icon and Atlanta congressman John Lewis, a vocal critic of President Donald Trump, stated that he would not attend his inauguration. In response to this statement, President Donald Trump accused John Lewis of ignoring his duties as a congressman and encouraged him to focus on his predominately black congressional district, which he claimed was in “horrible shape,” “falling apart,” and “crime infested.” Trump’s assertions about Lewis and his district were largely exaggerated. While the poverty and unemployment rates in the area are higher than the national average, the percentage of people with high school and college degrees is larger than the national average. Since 1992, shortly after John Lewis was voted as congressman over the district, the crime rate in his area has been on a steady decline (Qiu 2017).

Unfortunately, the lack of balance between stories of black poverty, black economic advancement and the grey areas in between leave many people to assume that most black communities are plagued with crime, poverty and social disorganization. Scholars have focused so much attention on the burden of blackness, without entertaining the possibility that there is something enjoyable about being black and living around black people (Lacy 2007:17). While one in four African Americans live below the poverty line, the other three out of four are considered working, middle or upper class. Yet, research on African Americans seem to focus on the disadvantaged and the stories of the black middle class go largely ignored (Patillo 1999).
Although most researchers have overlooked this trend, a few scholars have been dedicated to recording and examining the experiences of the black middle class (Frazier 1957, Feagin 1994, Patillo 1999, Lacy 2007, Robinson 2014). I introduce these scholars later and explore their research in more detail during my literature review.

While some scholarship has shed light on middle-class black experiences, there is also a regional bias in the research, with most of the black middle-class analysis focusing on more northern urban cities like Chicago and Washington D.C., (Patillo 1999; Lacy 2007). There have only been a few studies that shed light on the experiences of the black middle class in the deep south (Frazier 1957; Robinson 2014), which includes Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and South Carolina. In the early to mid-twentieth century, many blacks fled the south and migrated north because of systemic racism and the sharecropping system that kept many blacks in the south in impoverished conditions. This mass movement of blacks from the South to the North is called The Great Migration. Research studies such as The Story of the Negro (Johnson 1941) and The Black Bourgeoisie, explore the intersection of race, class and identity in the south during this time (Frazier 1957). The Civil Rights Movement eliminated explicit racist Jim Crow laws on the federal level and sought to improve life for black people in the southern region. According to some scholars, the movement was successful in this effort, and the black middle class expanded into white-collar jobs and suburban neighborhoods (Wilson 1987). However, the last major sociological study exploring race and class in a southern Black Mecca occurred before the Civil Rights Movement (Frazier 1957). Atlanta, which was a hub for the Civil Rights Movement and played a significant role in expanding the number of middle-class blacks, is often overlooked in research that assesses race and class in the United States.
Since the Civil Rights Movement, blacks have moved from northern cities where many lived in conditions plagued with crime, unemployment and racialized poverty. Race and class research in the South, specifically Atlanta, is particularly urgent given that Atlanta is a popular destination spot for people migrating out of the northern big cities and back to the south (Landry 1987, Cole and Omar 2003, Ginwright 2002, Davis 2016, Pendergrass 2017). The black population is growing more rapidly in the south than the north; yet, race and class scholarship has not caught up to this trend because much of it only explores middle-class black life in the urban North. It is important to explore these race and class disparities and experiences during this era of reverse migration.

According to Zandria Robinson (2014), the few studies that explore these dynamics in the South often highlight the experiences of more rural black Southerners, leaving out the stories of blacks (both middle and working class) in major urban cities like Atlanta. With the rise of reverse black migration, it is important that race and class research includes the experiences of minorities in the new urban south. My research fills this void in the literature by drawing upon in-depth interviews with thirty-four respondents and examines the way working and middle-class blacks negotiate and understand race, class identity, and the city of Atlanta as a “Black Mecca.” Much attention is focused on the way working and middle-class blacks perceive larger issues of race (police misconduct, poverty, personal racialized issues, etc), as well as the way both groups view each other. Because most race and class research examines black working and middle class groups in isolation, I study the interconnections between the two classes and the ways in which they see each other and their roles in combatting larger issues of racism. Lastly, I explore how the two groups view Atlanta as a “Black Mecca” and assess the way city development, leaders
and institutions have improved the quality of life for black people, while reinforcing race and class inequality.

While African Americans maintain strong racial ties to each other, some blacks may feel more comfortable concealing their social ties with the black poor. Other African Americans may prefer presenting a united front against white racism, and keeping intraracial class division a topic that remains “family (race) business.” While addressing these issues may be seen as airing the dirty laundry of the black community, I argue that exploring class division can help explain how African Americans have internalized systemic racism and psychologically created boundaries that inhibit racial unity and progress. Assessing these divisions can help the community come face to face with our own biases and find a common ground on which we can build a formidable stance against systemic inequality. In terms of the city, I argue that the story of Atlanta as a “Black Mecca” provides a unique historical and social context where race and class form a symbiotic relationship that helps to address these questions and must be studied alongside the backdrop of the larger systemic issues of inequalities plaguing our nation.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Race and Class Theory

Before examining the intersection of race and class, it is important to understand the way class has been defined in sociology. Karl Marx, W.E.B DuBois and Max Weber were among the first scholars to explicitly explore the effects of class on overall societal outcomes. According to Marx, class distinctions were separated between the owners (bourgeoisie) and workers who (proletariat). He recognized, but did not focus attention on, the entrepreneurs who owned small businesses with only a few workers. This group was labeled the petit bourgeoisie (Landry 1987). Currently, we would refer to them as middle class. Marx argued that owners had control over resources associated with production and used wages to negotiate power over workers. Labor power, or their ability to work, was the only thing the proletariat could control. The proletariat’s goal was to advance its class status through increase in wages, while the bourgeoisie sought to expand profit through ownership and labor exploitation (Marx 1867). The conflict lies between both agendas when workers recognize their lack of power, thus creating social movements that can lead to social advancement or social regression.

In the early twentieth century, Du Bois stated, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” (1903). This famous quote reminds researchers that W.E.B Du Bois was one of the first sociologist to apply a racial analysis to the social issues of U.S. American life in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, his popular position as a race scholar can often overshadow the class analysis he employed in many of his research studies. As a graduate student at Harvard, Du Bois challenged leading class scholars, including Marx, by examining wage differences in higher classes of labor. He concludes that wages are determined by the desires of the capitalists and began the role white racism played in the development of capitalism
Du Bois addresses class dynamics within the framework of a capitalist economy he calls “modern free competition,” which explains the role of domination and exploitation forced over poorer people. However, he argues that black workers experience a unique twist to this ploy and exists at the intersection of class manipulation and racial prejudice. The economic bondage of black people during Reconstruction created a U.S. caste system, which was reinforced by racialized state sanctioned oppression that forced African people into the sharecropping system. This occupation kept former enslaved people economically dependent on white farmers through exploitation and debt peonage. Jim Crow racism inhibited blacks from suffrage, justice and equal access to education, thus creating an economic entrapment that kept the masses of them in a system of poverty. According to Morris (2015), Du Bois argues that economic exploitation, disenfranchisement, and unequal access to education contributed to racial inequality and created a class hierarchy in the U.S. that largely victimizes the black population.

W.E.B Du Bois not only constructed new ways of sociologically examining the race/class dynamic in the United States, but he also influenced some of the fathers of sociology, particularly Max Weber. According to Morris (2015), part of Weber’s fascination with Du Bois’ scholarship was his ability to emphasize the impact of social-economic conditions upon the relations of the races to each other” (p. 159). He had absorbed Du Bois’ works from The Souls of Black Folk, and “The Occasional Papers of the Negro Academy” to The Philadelphia Negro and agreed with the notion of a global color line being the principal social problem in years to come. Early on, Weber subscribed to the idea that racial/ethnic groups varied in biological make up, which affected their ability to contribute to society. However, an ideological shift occurred when he encountered the teachings of Du Bois and adopted a socially constructionist view of race. He later concluded that social factors trumped biology in determining racial outcomes.
Morris (2015) claims that both Du Bois and Weber benefitted from their intellectual exchange, but Du Bois’ publications on caste and class precedes Weber’s, suggesting that most of the inspiration flowed from Du Bois to Weber.

Like his predecessors, Max Weber also viewed class as the relationship between a person and their economic position. Like Marx, he claimed that class is associated with life chances and circumstances that are shared between people within that class group. Unlike Marx, Weber argued for a more nuanced view of the proletariat and allowed for distinctions such as education and experience to separate the uneducated taxi cab driver from the educated engineer, even though they were both a part of the working class. Challenging Marx’s view of social action or class unity being largely based on material interests, Weber applied the Du Boisian notion of status and prestige as key contributors to social difference and economic class (Morris 2015). This notion of status and status groups as a central component of identity and privilege set Weber apart from many of his predecessors.

According to Landry (1987), Weber agreed that class should be viewed in terms of the economic division between owners and workers, but he also takes into account social, legal, or political power. These class interests are dependent upon, not just economic position, but social status and prestige. This notion moves class away from an explanation primarily based on material resources, but a construction that is also rooted in power derived from status and prestige. In my study, I apply the Weberian approach of class to black residents in Atlanta, by not only defining class in terms of income, but also measuring participants’ middle-class status using factors such as education and occupational prestige. I go into this in further detail in the methods chapter of the dissertation.
Historically, race more than income has played a key role in the way black Americans were viewed in society. Prior to emancipation, blacks were seen as property regardless of their income, largely because most were considered “slaves.” During the Reconstruction Era and onward, class status did not shield many African Americans from the horrors of Jim Crow. A person could be a victim of a lynch mob, turned away at the voting booth or subject to a white terrorist attack, regardless of their income bracket. Because of racism, blacks across classes still shared the same fate; therefore, the community used other factors besides income to help differentiate between the poor, working and middle-class groups.

In addition to income, the definition of middle class can also be attributed to a person’s educational attainment. Research shows that there are direct correlations between educational attainment and socioeconomic status (Halpern and Murphy 2013). Many African Americans view education as a key indicator and a determinant factor of black middle-class status (Landry 1987). African Americans’ belief in the importance of education as a middle-class marker speaks to their long battle for educational equality in the U.S. and may supersede occupational prestige and income. Attending and/or graduating college can be an indicator of a parent or guardian’s socioeconomic status. If someone’s parent or guardian paid for college or provided financial support for a child while college, then she/he may have come from a middle-class background. Whether the person finished college or not, attending college is an indicator that she/he has a strong financial support system. Many African Americans across classes still see education as a predictor of middle class and their best hope for social progression (Cole and Omari 2003).

In addition to income and education, some researchers may focus on occupations in determining class status. In U.S. American society, educational attainment tends to have a direct
correlation with occupational prestige (Dimaggio and Moore 1985). Doctors, lawyers, teachers, or businessmen are often seen as middle-class occupations and white-collar employment has been used as a marker for middle-class status in much of the research literature on race and class (Frazier 1957; Blackwell 1985; Landry 1987; Feagin and Sykes 1994; Patillo 2000).

2.2 Exploring Black Identities

Three theoretical concepts have shaped the dialogue of race and class in recent scholarship: declining significance of race, out migration theory, and boundary work. These models help us understand the way black Americans construct and negotiate identities.

2.2.1 Declining Significance of Race, William Julius Wilson, and other critics.

Scholarship on race and class in the United States began to increase after the Civil Rights Movement, with William Julius Wilson becoming one of the foremost scholars on the subject. In The Declining Significance of Race, Wilson (1978) claimed that class, rather than race, was becoming a more important factor in determining life outcomes for blacks in the poor areas of the city. He argued that the Civil Rights triumphs mainly benefited the middle class of black society and did little to rectify the economic conditions of the black poor in the urban ghetto. In his work, he found an increasing number of highly concentrated disadvantaged blacks in urban areas that he labels “ghetto underclass” (Wilson 1987:49).

While Wilson (1987) argued that class was becoming a more significant factor than race in determining life outcomes for blacks, several critics challenged Wilson’s claims and conclude that race is a major factor in creating disadvantage for black people across classes. Bonilla-Silva (2006) opposes Wilson’s notion of a declining significance of race by exploring new ways in which racism is carried out in a post-Civil Rights United States. Bonilla-Silva (2006) presents data showing that even whites (82.5 percent) still believe that discrimination is a problem in this
country. Through his theory of colorblind racism, he makes the claim of a new kind of racism that allows whites to degrade minorities without appearing racist. Although Bonilla Silva does not include a strong class component in his analysis of race in a colorblind society, he argues that new civil and human rights leadership “must take seriously the plights of the black majority as well as the plight of the black middle class” (2001:203).

Massey and Denton (1993) oppose Wilson by arguing that race and racism is reinforced through residential segregation. Although the Fair Housing Act of 1968 legally eradicated residential racial discrimination, since the Civil Rights Movement, blacks have been disproportionately affected by housing inequality and concentrated poverty. Moreso, residential integration is more difficult for blacks than Asians and Hispanics regardless of one’s socioeconomic level (Massey and Denton 1993). Massey and Denton shift the academic conversation back to race and recognize it as an important factor in residential separation and the creation of “hypersegregation.” This term describes areas where a large number of blacks are concentrated in one locale, usually contributing to extreme poverty. Massey and Denton (1993) use data showing that as income rises, whites are able to escape disadvantaged neighborhoods and relocate to communities with better conditions. In contrast, government laws segregate all blacks and concentrate them in disadvantaged places no matter what income they achieve, which suggest that race contributes to residential segregation regardless of class. The lack of concentrated white poverty in comparison to black and Latino impoverished areas shows that race plays a central role in systems of inequality (Patillo 2003).

Feagin critiques Wilson’s claim of improved conditions for the black middle class and a declining significance of race by addressing the unique ways middle-class blacks have to navigate racialized situations. Feagin (1991) argues that both working and middle-class blacks
experience discrimination in a post-Civil Rights era. Middle-class blacks are subject to hostile work environments, discrimination in public accommodations and police misconduct due to their skin color.

While both middle and working-class blacks experience racism and discrimination, the middle class are still able to acquire many of the resources they desire (Lacy 2007). Although they suffer from racial and economic discrimination, middle-class blacks “sit at the doorstep of middle class privilege” (Patillo 1999:12). Professional blacks have class privilege, which allows them to combat discrimination in the courtroom, through the media and with professional networks. These benefits include a house, career opportunities, financial resources and networks that allow them to use their middle-class status to lessen the blow of racism. These advantages can be traced back to the victories of the Civil Rights Movement (Feagin and Sikes 1994) since many middle-class blacks depend on state-sanctioned civil rights legislation to obtain and maintain their white-collar careers. Those policies may not help working-class blacks in the same way if at all.

Some critics state that once middle-class African Americans got the opportunity, they traded their race card for class access (Wilson 1987). In short, race was declining in significance, and socioeconomic mobility became the central focus for professional blacks. However, social science research shows that after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the black middle class felt a sense of group cohesion with the black poor, maintained a sense of racial solidarity and did not separate themselves from working-class blacks (Sampson and Milam 1975). Myers and Magavio (1983) suggests that in the 1960s and 70s, the black middle class’ racial group identification increased over the course of ten years. Hwan Fitzpatrick and Helms (1998) finds that the black middle class is neither lower nor more ethnocentric than the “lower”
class. Moreover, the post-Civil Rights middle class appear to be more in-group oriented than pre-Civil Rights middle-class blacks.

2.2.2 Out Migration Theory, Wilson and other critics

According to Wilson (1987), prior to the Civil Rights Movement, working and middle-class blacks lived in the same neighborhoods and communities. This was a result of the Jim Crow laws that did not allow many of them to live in white neighborhoods. Segregation forced African Americans to live in their own communities, open businesses and become financially interdependent on each other. Professional blacks maintained the fiscal base to patronize and run these businesses, while working-class blacks could be employed as workers. Economic independence from whites was necessary and helpful to the African-American community as they began to form their own ethnic niches, while simultaneously calling for equal rights during the Civil Rights Movement. After the passing of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, African Americans could legally reside in former all white neighborhoods and communities. Soon, the black middle class began to take advantage of this new housing opportunity and they began to migrate out of all-black communities and into predominately white neighborhoods. This mass exodus resulted in the closing of many local black businesses, as these former thriving communities began to crumble. Wilson describes the remaining poor residents of these areas as “ghetto underclass,” individuals who were left in these poor conditions, which led to a further intraracial divide between advantaged and disadvantaged blacks.

Mary Patillo (1999) addresses this larger claim of a black middle class out migration through her an ethnographic study of a Chicago black middle-class neighborhood. In her book Black Pickett Fences, she critiques Wilson’s out migration theory by stating that there is little empirical evidence supporting the notion that the black middle class abandoned the poor. Post-
Civil Rights, middle-class blacks were able to leave predominately poor black spaces due to federal legislation but did not get very far. In her first book, *Black Pickett Fences*, Mary Patillo provided a rich and detailed analysis of a population that received little scholarly attention----the black middle class. In this study, she focuses on a middle-class black area known as Groveland and the environmental realities of this demographic, which are poverty, higher crime, worse schools, and fewer social services than what can be found in middle-class white areas. Through neighborhood ties, friendship and family connections, the black middle class are geographically and ideologically connected to the black poor. They still share the same schools, stores, and social institutions with poor and working-class residents, thus many of the same social issues that affect the black poor are in the backyards of black middle-class neighborhoods (Patillo 1999, Anderson 2000). She illustrates the trapping of the black middle class and concludes that high poverty rates in predominately black neighborhoods continually drive affluent blacks from ghetto areas, while segregation forcefully reincorporates black middle-class neighborhoods back into impoverished conditions (Patillo 2000). Some of these conditions include underfunded schools, poor housing, poor social services, drugs and violence, neighborhood characteristics that are shared by both advantaged and disadvantaged blacks. Middle-class blacks are not far enough from the poor neighborhoods to avoid these structural barriers, which makes the black middle class very different from the white middle class.

Some of these same issues can be found in lower income white neighborhoods. However, upper and middle-class whites do not suffer from residential segregation and are able to live in homes and communities that are geographically separated from lower income whites, isolating them from the social disadvantage that can exist in impoverished neighborhoods. While black poor, working and middle-class city residents are connected across classes because
of the larger racial issues that keep middle-class blacks near more disadvantaged blacks, upper
and middle-class whites can exist without being affected by the social ills that may shape the
experiences of their lower-class counterparts. Policy changes and legislation that negatively
affect the white poor, such as less access to health care, have little effect on the white middle
class because of their lack of shared experiences. In contrast to many middle-class whites, class
relationships are much more pronounced in black neighborhoods. Policies that hurt the black
poor can negatively affect the black middle class due to their common neighborhood effects and
linked fate. Therefore, legislation that continues affirmative action, comparable wages, and
residential equality will help cement the gains made by the black middle class since the Civil
Rights Movement (Patillo 1999).

2.2.3 Boundary work, Michele Lamont and other scholars

The separation between races, ethnicities, and classes can also be understood in terms of
the larger concept of boundary-work. Michele Lamont uses boundary work to “designate the
process by which people differentiate themselves from others” (Lamont 2002:270). In her book,
the Dignity of Working Men, she explores the ways working-class black and white men in the
U.S. and France create racial and class identity boundaries. In this study, I focus on two of her
boundary-making theories, the “people above” and the “people below,” two concepts used to
explain the intraracial class relationships within the black community.

2.2.3.1 Boundary work—How the working class view the “people above”

While Michele Lamont, draws attention to the boundary making and identity construction
of working-class men across racial and ethnic lines, I focus on her analysis that deals with the way
the black and white working class view people within their racial group. According to Lamont,
both white and black workers vary in their performance of boundary work, yet these worlds can
partly overlap along class lines. Like whites, many blacks measure success based on increased income and ambition. However, black workers find a larger appreciation for money than whites and are more likely to use it as a definition for success. This appreciation for money could be associated with the belief that minorities with a larger income can use their resources to combat racial injustices and stigmas related to black people. Money is not seen as a way of oppressing a lower group, but a tool to help overcome the disadvantage attached to their skin color. Working-class blacks see the people with this tool as added value to the community and praise them for specific middle-class values such as goal orientation, ambition and leadership. Black workers place a greater emphasis on leadership than whites, which could also explain why it be a requirement for black social movements. The black respondents in Lamont’s study see leadership as an important value that can be used to keep drugs at bay and some look to the middle-class educated population as leaders.

Although money can be seen as a racial equalizer, Lamont finds that working-class blacks also describe the “people above” as being immoral and selfish with their resources. Overall, blacks have a more negative view of power and authority than whites. This perception can be the result of the racist experiences black Americans have with law enforcement (Weitzer and Tuch 2004) teachers and other authority figures. Experiencing racism all their lives from people in power makes them less likely than whites to equate upward mobility with advanced morality. In addition, black workers draw fewer boundaries against the advantaged class than whites; however, the boundaries that blacks do draw are much stronger than the ones erected by whites. Many times, in Lamont’s study, black workers viewed middle-class blacks and white people in the same way. Therefore, the critique that they offer the larger middle class resembles the one made by white workers. Both working-class blacks and whites see them as domineering, exploitative, and selfish.
In the same way that black workers equate white with middle class, white workers also correlate being black with poverty. This finding suggests that race can sometimes trump class in terms of the way blacks and whites are treated. Because of one’s racial identity, middle-class blacks can be perceived as poor, while working-class whites can be treated as middle class (Lamont 2002).

2.2.3.2 Boundary work—How the working class view the “people below”

One finding that frequently came up in Lamont’s analysis was the fact that blacks are more accepting of the poor than whites and quicker to offer structural explanations for poverty, as opposed to individual reasons. Therefore, social status is not a concrete signal of high morality, since most do not believe that they function on a level playing field. This perception can even contribute to their own self-deprecation (Lamont 2002:119) largely due to the lack of education, resources and contacts that are available to them. The American Dream becomes a mythic notion that is more difficult to achieve, and they are more likely to support economic redistribution, which explains their collectivist outlook.

In contrast, this idea of racial solidarity between the working class and the poor can be limited by black workers’ perspective of lower class “no-good niggers” whom they see as people with no morals, plans or hopes (Lamont 2002). Even though there is a belief in differences of morality between the two classes, the class boundaries the working class creates between themselves and the “lower class” has less to do with moral outlook and more for practical purposes. Many working-class blacks seek to protect their resources and the vulnerable position that exists between themselves and the underclass. Dangers associated with black poverty like the availability of drugs is a concern for working-class blacks and can explain why they maintain clear boundaries between the “mainstream” and the “non-mainstream.” Many of Lamont’s respondents understand that a few bad breaks can result in a working-class member slipping into
the disadvantaged category. Therefore, their collectivist outlook and belief in giving back to the community can inhibit their upward mobility. The economic needs of a few contrast with their moral responsibility to the many (Lamont 2002). In her research, Lamont finds that Blacks see their friends, family and community as people that can put enormous responsibility on them financially and can inhibit their ability to “move up in the world.”

Similar to my research hypothesis, Michele Lamont finds that the boundary-making practices that exist between working and middle-class blacks can inhibit racial unity. The working-class black men in her study find value in middle-class blacks, but despise their behaviors. In addition, they feel a sense of responsibility to the disadvantaged, while also seeing some as economic burdens that can be used to compromise their already precarious class position and lead them towards downward mobility. In my research, I expand on these ideas by exploring intraracial boundary-making strategies among both black men and women. This is done within the context of a city that has been labeled the “Black Mecca,” which I argue adds another layer to the belief in middle-class responsibility to the lower class.

2.2.3.3 Other responses to boundary making

Michele Lamont (2002) finds that the desire for economic mobility coupled with the responsibility of giving back is a predominant view among working-class blacks. Shelton and Wilson (2006) find research that supports this theory of group interest, which states that for black Americans, group-based racial feelings take precedence over social class in terms of creating a racial identity. This idea challenges the notion that minority groups of a higher economic status disregard the interests of working-class individuals within their racial group (Hicks and Pitre 2010). Research on race and class in the early twentieth century suggest that blacks of a higher economic position “was so eager for white acceptance and fearful of being lumped with the mass
of shiftless blacks that it turned its back on the poor” (Guzman 2016 p. 8). Bart Landy (1987) reports that mulatto elite, an early version of the black middle class, would set themselves apart from the masses of black people and created their own community and society that was patterned after their white counterparts. In some cases, the elite blacks would exclude other African Americans by creating their own high-status congregations like St Matthews Episcopal in Detroit (Landry 1987).

Overtime, racial advancement was seen as a community effort with academics expressing the importance of cross-class coalitions within the African American community (DuBois 1903, Frazier 1957). However, history shows that working-class and poor blacks continued to get left behind during moments of forward progression. At the end of the 1920s, the U.S. stock market crashed and the economic foundation of cities across the country took a major hit. This new era was known as the Great Depression. In response to these hard times, President Roosevelt initiated the New Deal, which was a series of social programs designed to provide jobs and relief for working citizens. Federal welfare programs helped to increase the black middle class by producing more African American teachers, caseworkers and public housing managers (Ferguson 2002). The black elite and reformers in Atlanta began to shift federal support towards these “deserving” African Americans, thus excluding poor blacks who made up a larger part of the population. Black reformers used respectability politics to create common ground between blacks and whites in the south, showing that they could maintain the hard-working standards whites boasted (Ferguson 2002). The same black elites, W.E.B DuBois, Reverend Henry Hugh Proctor and others, criticized black working-class members for poor work ethics and lascivious activities (Mixon 2005). It is to be admired that the black elite made advances in housing for blacks, voter’s registration, and over all activism in the community during this time. However
this racial uplift ideology, the belief that the educated elite were responsible for the welfare of the race, rarely addressed issues affecting the black poor, thus exacerbating the division between working and middle-class blacks in Atlanta (Ferguson 2002, Chambliss 2008) and further cementing the belief that middle-class blacks had turned their backs on the black poor and working class.

This position of a perceived disregard for less economically advantaged blacks was not only found in race and class relations of the early twentieth century but can also be seen in post-Civil Rights research. Gary Marx reports survey findings from the early 60s showing that those who have been higher status for a long period of time are more likely to have a vested interest in the system than those who have recently arrived (Bloom 1987). Social science research in the 1970s and 80s explored an even bigger divide in the black working and middle class, as scholars found that the emerging black underclass maintained significant cultural behaviors and identities that were inconsistent with this growing black middle class (Wilson 1987). Post-Civil Rights new middle-class blacks focused attention on private deals (similar to what was used by the elite after WWII), corporate partnerships and professional “firsts” over the grassroots organizing of the Civil Rights Movement as a way of addressing racial injustice for minorities across classes. This change in approach helped to create a class divide that is still evident in many facets of black life including black gentrification (Hyra 2006, Boyd 2008).

Researchers argue that the rise of this new black middle class occurred between 1960 and 1970 (see Landry 1987, Cole and Omari 2003). Landry (1987) claims that the “racial progress” of the 1960’s helped to create this new black middle class, which arose during the Civil Rights era and gained access to social institutions that were once denied to all blacks (Wilson 1978). Although the Civil Rights Movement became a catalyst for black social mobility and racial
integration, some scholars argue that it mainly benefitted economically advantaged blacks and its leaders disregarded the needs of the black poor (Wilson 1987). This perceived neglect of the more disadvantaged group, continued to draw a wedge between both middle and working-class blacks, and this tension would continue for decades to come. Early Civil Rights leaders and initiatives like Martin Luther King Jr.’s Chicago housing campaign, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom shows that city leaders attempted to solve social issues related to both low income and well to do blacks. While this is the case, there are still examples of intraracial class division in post-Civil Rights cities, specifically Atlanta. In 1970 following the federal busing mandate promoting school integration, Georgia governor Lester Maddox and Atlanta Board of Education Chairman Benjamin Mays, began to address the government’s requirement to integrate teachers. In opposition, Governor Lestor Maddox began to encourage school boycotts. Tension between the black community and the school board flared until officials agreed to limit student busing in return for a more integrated faculty and staff (The Desegregation of Atlanta Schools). This example shows how middle-class values of integration and job opportunities for black teachers and professionals took precedence over the federal busing mandates, which provided educational equality for low-income minority students.

Class is not the only variable used by scholars to assess black people’s sense of racial identity. Along gender lines, research shows that black women employed in white-collar (largely seen as middle class) jobs display a stronger commitment to pro black ideas than black men (Shelton and Wilson 2006). While research supports the notion that the middle class maintains a group identity with the larger African American racial group, some elements of

11 There is no official definition for the term “pro black.” However, it is a cultural colloquialism that suggests a person greatly supports black people and encourages overall success for the black community across the diaspora.
economic status including cultural differences and identity can draw a distinct boundary line between working, lower middle and middle-class blacks. Coner-Edwards and Spurlock (1988) find much variation in income and lifestyles between middle-class income markers of $25,000 and above $50,000. Economic boundaries afford upper middle-class blacks experiences that are not found in the lower middle class.

While few scholars have explored the black middle class and even the nuanced identities within the black middle class, Karyn Lacy is one of the few to focus attention on a specific segment of the black middle class—the upper middle class. Her research answers Michelle Lamont’s suggestion that boundary work should also address the upper black middle class and explore how this group erects symbolic boundaries between themselves, whites and blacks across classes. Through this study, Lacy explains the processes used to establish and sustain a black middle-class identity. Her book Blue-Chip Black is set apart from previous research, because it focuses on middle-class black communities where poor blacks are not present. This study is unique because it introduces the notion of distinction within the black middle class and the correlation between residential differences and social identity. In addition, Lacy brings attention to the growing black middle class in the South by using Washington D.C. as a testing site. She describes her findings in a theoretical construct known as the “black middle class tool kit.” The use of a tool kit is a sociological way of explaining material (i.e. college diploma) and nonmaterial (i.e. bar mitzvah) cultural forms used by people to negotiate interaction (Patillo-McCoy 1998). Ann Swilder (1986) explains culture as a collective of symbols, stories, rituals, and ideas to solve larger problems. The way these components are constructed is described as a toolkit or repertoire that is used to implement action and negotiation of behavior. These objects and symbols define and help communicate meaning. Lower middle-class blacks in Chicago
utilize church traditions, religious objects and actions unique to the black church as a tool kit to maintain community within their neighborhoods and social settings. Grassroots organizing, civic life and political events can reflect the black tool kit (Patillo-McCoy 1998) (Church Culture as a strategy of action in the black community). Swindler (1986) claims that a person’s culture, whether class or race, offers a person tools that can be used to determine lines of action. Therefore, Lacy applies this tool kit to the class distinctions that make economically advanced blacks distinguishable from working and lower middle-class blacks. Her black middle-class tool kit is comprised of public, status-based, racial and class-based identities that are used to secure their unique position in society. These identities are used to negotiate interactions between whites across classes, lower-class blacks and other middle-class blacks.

In public settings, Lacy found that middle-class blacks employ certain identities to assert their middle-class status, in hopes of eliminating or curtailing racial discrimination. To negotiate interactions in a public setting, middle-class blacks will learn and display cultural capital. This term is used by theorists who argue that cultural capital is the vehicle for public identities, and the lack of exposure to this cultural capital, norms, cultural codes, behaviors and resources that children learn from their advantaged parents, can help reinforce inequality. Cultural capital can take the form of linguistic styles, aesthetic preferences, or styles of interaction (Lacy 2007 p. 77) and become normalized among certain groups, thus marginalizing individuals outside of the group that do not practice the same behaviors. Typically, poor and working-class people fall prey to racism because they have not internalized or practiced the same cultural capital as more privileged people. Black cultural capital, a term coined by Prudence Carter (1974), is utilized by black people to send messages to other blacks signaling them of their black authenticity. These messages may include knowing the most recent rap artists or speaking black English. Lacy
extends this notion of cultural capital to middle-class blacks to assess the way they cope with inequality. She found that blacks who were not born into a middle-class family, but achieve it later in life, are less likely to display certain cultural attributes as those individuals who were born and raised as a middle-class person. In terms of race, they also employ processes known as improvisational and script switching. Because many middle-class blacks have the racial privilege of growing up in integrated settings, they can present a public identity that is distinctly black, and middle class, which is similar to the white cultural codes and practices of their upbringing. These strategies are used to help minimize the severity of discrimination to which they may be subjected.

In addition to public identities, Lacy also found that status-based identities were a key component in her black middle-class toolkit. Status identities are differentiated based on economic status and through this negotiation the black middle class is separated into two groups: the elite black middle class and the core black middle class. According to Lacy, the elite black middle class reproduce status by foregoing risky financial moves such as stock investments, to provide their children with the best education. They are more likely to spend thousands of dollars on their child’s education to ensure that they can maintain a middle-class lifestyle when they become adults and perpetuate this middle-class status. Core middle-class blacks do not have the income and wealth access that the elite black middle class has, therefore, they take a more conservative approach to spending money on their children. Instead, they will save money by allowing their children to attend cheaper or public schools, and instead put funds towards retirement to ensure that they are able to maintain their middle-class status. Lacy describes the differences in the two status-based identities this way, “Blacks who spend lavishly on their children….see their spending as an investment in the process. Blacks…who spend more
conservatively on their children, think about their status in terms of protecting what they have.” Upper middle-class blacks, though they prefer to be called middle class, are usually free from financial burden and see consumptions decisions as a way of reproducing their status, while core middle-class blacks are focused on continuing the status they have. These examples show that blacks not only negotiate status between class lines, but within them. According to Lacy, they argue that there is a difference in material interests and life chances that exist between the two groups. The economic privilege between the two groups are substantial; therefore, the type of middle-class lifestyle that their children are exposed to is markedly different.

Class-based identities are used to create boundaries between middle-class and lower-class blacks. In her exploration of identity and the black middle class in Washington D.C., Karyn Lacy (2007) finds the black middle class employs ways to let whites know that while they share certain commonalities with black people (institutions, cultural identity, etc), they are more “refined” than their working-class counterparts. For many people, this identity distinction between the working class and middle class is done to gain white acceptance. She characterizes this action as social differentiation, which is a way for middle-class blacks to use public identity as a signal to whites that they are not like “those poor black people.” This attempt to make their middle-class status known to others can be the result of the extra effort it takes African Americans to reach and maintain middle-class status; a struggle that many middle-class whites take for granted (Lacy 2007). The upper middle class believes their choice of residence is a significant class marker and it is boundary work that is used to reinforce their social category. In addition, the elite blacks believe that the reprehensible bad behavior of the lower-class blacks were another point of separation. It is a reminder to the rest of the blacks that there is a distinction in the actions and behavior between the two groups (Lacy 2007).
Lacy’s extensive study of the black middle class in her book *Blue Chip Black* expands readers’ view of this demographic. Complex boundary-work and identity construction are conscious and subconscious acts used to create and define a black middle-class identity. She argues that these identity markers should be included in the more common indicators of middle-class status along with income, occupation, education and homeownership. Although, Lacy examines upper middle-class blacks and their boundary work, she looks at these groups in isolation without exploring the relationships between groups across classes. Although she also states that these groups still interact with their larger racial groups and desire racial cohesion, Lacy gives few accounts of the complex interwoven connection that exists between working-class and middle-class blacks. My research explores these relationships, the boundary negotiation that exists and the way the city’s urban landscape plays a role in identity construction.

Other researchers such as Richard Delgado (2014) explore these boundary constructions in other racial minority groups. To distance themselves from the stereotypes of the working class, middle-class Latinos practice what Delgado (2014) calls “identity not.” This concept describes the way middle-class minorities talk about who they are not by highlighting what they are in a racial context. It is a way of dealing with racist stereotypes by explaining to people that they are not like other people within their racial group. Delgado claims the Mexican middle class employ “identity not” by using derogatory terms to describe their working-class counterparts. They also speak English as properly as they can to differentiate themselves from the less educated low-income Mexicans. In conversations with people among their class group, they may use phrases like “I’m Mexican, but I’m not like those Mexicans.” Although they embrace their Latino/a heritage, they prefer to align themselves with white standards and beauty.
Elijah Anderson (2000) explores division among the working class in his concept of “street” versus “decent.” In disadvantaged black neighborhoods, most residents are characterized as “decent” hardworking and self-reliant. “Street” individuals are plagued with disorganization and show a lack of consideration for others. Since, street people in Anderson’s study see upward mobility as “disrespecting” the community, some decent people must advance on their own. Street people may police the decent individuals to ensure that they don’t leave the community for higher socioeconomic status. This action of “moving out the hood” is seen as selling out, or “acting white” and can even result in physical violence between the groups.

While working-class blacks may negotiate class identity among their group, middle-class blacks practice identity-not and prefer to separate themselves from blackness that does not mirror middle-class values. Still, many of them enjoy the styles and fashion associated with being poor and black. Patillo refers to this attraction as a “ghetto trance.” She claims that while most kids in her study were law-abiding citizens, many of them share the same hairstyles, dress styles and language as the “street” children. The mainstream acceptance of hip-hop turned street styles into popular culture. Whites and blacks across classes became fascinated with ghetto life. While the phrase “ghetto” is commonly used in social science research to describe predominately all-black predominately poor neighborhoods, Patillo states that the term can also mean, “cool.” It is a style that transcends the racist and classist meanings that motivate it.

Lower middle-class blacks continue to be a vulnerable population, with many of them living near areas of concentrated poverty. Having the same experiences of economic pressure that are found in disadvantaged communities, lower middle-class black youth often feel a connection to the ghetto, gangsta style. “Ghetto trance” and “street versus decent” shows that racial implications are embedded in class identity construction and must be explored in
conjunction with each other in order to advance knowledge of either group (Ortner 1998 see also Cole and Omari 2003).

In addition to the racial and class identities that exist between economic groups within the black community, boundary negotiation can also exist within and across regions. Although I have explored several studies that focus attention on this under-researched topic, these studies exist outside of the core South. Some may argue that Lacy’s study in Washington D.C. takes place in the south. D.C. has been considered the historical south because of its location below the Mason-Dixon line and the U.S. census still lists Maryland as a southern state. However, this label may not be accurate, seeing that Delaware is also listed as a southern state (Ottenhoff 2011). In a 2011 Washington Post article, Steve Hendrix claims interviewers see the district as not having much in common with the traditional northern city (Hendrix 2011). Therefore, it is evident that there is still a need for race and class research in areas that are undisputedly southern.

Participating in traditional southern practices (family, church and dinners) can allow more affluent blacks to maintain a connection with authentic blackness while comfortably disengaging from poor and other black communities on a consistent basis. Zandria Robinson keeps the dialogue current by following the trend of reverse black migration to the South in the twentieth century and exploring the social constructions of race, class, and identity within the lower South. She specifies the notion of regional identity as an added layer to black identity in what is labeled as the Post-Soul South, while exposing readers to the southern version of the Black Meccas---Soul Cities. Soul Cities (Atlanta, Memphis, Jackson and New Orleans) are characterized by dominant African American populations, racialized power dynamics, and connections between rural and small town black communities. These Soul Cities have
maintained or increased their black population, while predominately black cities in the north have seen a decline in their African American population. Using Memphis as a testing site, Robinson addresses the relationship between region, class and racial identities.

In some cases, Robinson sees the South as a center for respectability politics and a place that holds firm to middle-class values. For example, one respondent in Robinson’s book suggests that the further South a person goes, the closer to middle class values they become. These values include behaviors like speaking to strangers and showing humility. Robinson writes that critics of the South admire the myths and values that are stereotypically southern. This “southern hospitality” is viewed by Southerners and non-Southerners as a middle-class value, thus confounding regional identity with class division and acceptance.

Robinson finds that black Southerners, like Lamont’s black use respondents, identified as a “lower class” person, even if they were defined by the author as middle class. Affluent respondents often downplayed their economic status, which further corroborates this “middle class” southern value of humility mentioned above.

Overall, region helps to define class, downplay class identities and create intraracial boundaries within regions. Robinson finds that Southerners use the term “bougie” to describes all northerners or elitist Southerners. Some respondents use “country” to describe negative southern behavior often attributed to lower class. Across classes, Southerners used country as a way of redefining “country cosmopolitanism,” which is a way of distinguishing themselves from non-southern blacks who are not as “down to earth.” It explains how Southerners can still be racially authentic and maintain sophistication and culture---characteristics largely attributed to the middle class (Robinson 2014).
Racial theories such as out migration, the declining significance of race, and boundary making are all key concepts in the dialogue of race and class. What sets this study apart is how all these concepts play out in the south, specifically in Atlanta, which is often labeled as the Black Mecca. In the next section, I explore how Atlanta differs from other U.S. cities, specifically in the South and why it is an important city to consider when addressing the issue of race and class in the United States.

2.3 Atlanta as a Black Mecca

*Oxford Dictionary* defines a “mecca” as a place, which attracts people of a particular group or with a particular interest. While there is no universal definition of a “Black Mecca,” research shows that the term is complex and made up of many components, yet is understood and labeled by people and institutions that are impacted by its presence. Three cities, Harlem, New York, Washington D.C., and Atlanta, Ga., have been considered Black Meccas in U.S. history, and they all maintained a sizable black population, significant black institutions, a creative class, a community of black-owned businesses and a legacy that continues to reshape the story of black Americans in this country\(^2\).

While there has been much scholarship by scholars exploring race and class differences in the black community (Wilson 1987; Landry 1987; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Patillo1999; Lacy 2007), my research uses Atlanta’s black representation in politics, business and education as an historical backdrop to understanding these issues of race and class identity. In this next section, I explore the reasons why Atlanta is a prime site for examining racial identity constructions, class inequality and how they are negotiated and reinforced in and around the city.

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\(^2\) E. Franklin Frazier recognizes Durham, North Carolina as a “capital of the black middle class.” However, I do not include Durham in the list of the Black Meccas. Although it was a key city with a robust black middle class, there is little research that refers to it as a Black Mecca or chocolate city. This could be due to its lack of other factors (academic institutions, creative class, black political legacy) that place Atlanta, Harlem and Washington D.C. in this list.
2.4 Reverse Migration and the creation of Atlanta as a Black Mecca

After the emancipation of slavery, blacks still found themselves with limited opportunity through Jim Crow segregation and the sharecropping system, which scholarly accounts (Byres 1983, Austin 2012) argue was a legal form of slavery that kept African Americans in an economic deficit. At the turn of the twentieth century, many white men left the U.S. to fight in World War I, leaving jobs available in the northern parts of the country. African Americans began migrating north to cities like Chicago, Harlem, Pittsburgh and St Louis for better opportunities. Jobs and business expansion in the north led to an increasing black middle class in these areas. According to Frazier (1957), during this time the black middle class in the South was smaller and had less income than the black middle class in the North. In her book, The Warmth of Other Suns, Isabelle Wilkerson (2011) called this great migration “the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage.” She later said, it would cause the South to “search for its soul” and shake off its patterns of discrimination (Toppo and Overberg 2015).

A few decades later, it did just that. The rise and victories of the Civil Rights Movement and other resistance efforts helped to increase opportunities, job placement, residence choices and life chances for blacks in the south. In the latter half of the century, a reverse migration occurred as more African Americans returned to the South. Between 1910 and 1970, roughly 6 million blacks left the south. By 2000, approximately nine in ten African Americans lived in the south, specifically rural areas (Toppo and Overberg 2015). The desire to move south was largely due to economic pull, cultural ties, and a sense of ancestral history. In a good economy, many educated blacks can live anywhere, and many are choosing to go to college and live in the South (Toppo and Overberg 2015).
With this reverse migration, there has been a significant increase in the black population within cities like Houston and Atlanta (Landry 1987 see Cole and Omar 2003, Ginwright 2002). In the 1980s, whispers about Atlanta as a top destination spot began to occur among blacks in the professional arena (Jackson 2011). Between 2000 and 2009, metro Atlanta added roughly a half a million black people. By 2010, metropolitan Atlanta boasted the highest numerical gain of black residents of any city area in the country (Kenney 2016). In the past, Chicago’s Cook County was known as the largest black population of any county in the country. However, Chicago continues to see a drop, while the greater Atlanta area experiences mass gains with 198,031 newcomers in 2015 (Davis 2016). Michelle Eloy (2015) of NPR (National Public Radio) calls Atlanta a city full of transplants as its rising black middle class makes people want to tap into that labor market, says Frey (Davis 2016). With 57 percent of blacks in the country residing in the south, it is important that research includes stories of minorities in urban southern cities such as Atlanta and its metro area. Cities like Atlanta display a much larger black middle class than the one Frazier experienced.

2.5 Education, Politics and Economics

Following the Civil War and emancipation of slavery in the 1860s, the federal government created the Freedmens Bureau. This organization was put in place to help newly freed African Americans become integrated into U.S. society through education, employment and business. The creation of black-owned businesses led to Harlem being the first city described as a black Mecca. Later, E. Franklin Frazier dubbed Durham, North Carolina and its thriving African American communities the “capital of the black middle class” (Frazier 1925). However in a 1971 *Ebony* magazine article entitled *Atlanta: Black Mecca of the South*, Atlanta would receive and hold on to the title of a black mecca. Soon, the phrase would appear in a
number of newspaper articles and magazines (Charles Jaret 1987). According to Charles Jaret, the title “black mecca” ascribed to Atlanta is mainly because of two reasons. First, that Atlanta attracts black migrants from all over the state, country and world. Second, Atlanta offers black residents more social, economic, political and educational opportunities than most other communities (Charles Jaret 1987). The Atlanta University Center is one of the premier educational locales for black students in the country and has helped attract people to the city and solidify it as a “Black Mecca.”

Several black colleges and universities were established in Atlanta through the Freedmen’s Bureau. With the creation of these institutions, Atlanta became home to the largest consortium of black colleges in the world. In a 2015 Forbes article, two of the four fully functioning institutions, Spelman and Morehouse, ranked first and third as the nation’s top historically black colleges respectively (Kotkin 2015). Some of the most remarkable figures in our country’s history matriculated through these schools including: Alice Walker, James Weldon Johnson and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Some of the most renown sociological studies of the 20th century, many led by W.E.B DuBois, were conducted in this haven for education also known as the Atlanta University Center. This school of thought has been named the Atlanta DuBois School of sociology and the foundation for modern sociological understanding (Morris 2015). In addition to producing future doctors, lawyers, authors and world changers, this college network also trained some of the brightest minds in Atlanta politics and helped create a political tradition that has been unrivaled by any other city in the United States. Atlanta University was affectionately known as the “black Harvard” and provided the city with highly educated black leaders (Kunerth 1988).
Atlanta boasts strong black political legacy spanning four decades. In the 1940’s, like many southern black cities, Atlanta had a large black population with little to no political representation. Later in the decade, a group of Atlanta’s black leaders addressed their concerns with Mayor Hartsfield. He agreed to consider their proposals if they could secure 10,000 registered voters. They returned 51 days later with 18,000 registered voters and the next year the police force was integrated, thus beginning the trend of black political power in the city. In the city election of 1969, black voters helped shift mayoral power from traditional conservative white leadership to the newly elected liberal Jewish candidate Sam Massell. He was the transitional figure in this racial shift of Atlanta politics (Kunerth 1988). Since his term was complete in 1973, every mayor of Atlanta has been African American, starting with Maynard Jackson.

According to Sam Massell, the black community runs the politics of the city, while much of the finances are still controlled by whites (Monroe 2010). The three governing bodies in Atlanta are the city council, board of education and Fulton County Board of Commissioners. As of 1977, fifty percent or more of the council and school board were black respectively, with two of seven County Commissioners identifying as black (Jones 1978). By 1977, black people made up 53 percent of Atlanta’s registered voters (Jones 1978), while whites controlled financial powerhouses that can be found in the northern area of Atlanta. Currently Atlanta’s mayor, eleven out of sixteen council members and five out of nine board of education members are black, thus making the governing body of the city largely controlled by African Americans. With Buckhead being the ninth wealthiest zip code in the nation, this predominately white district is said to successfully work with the black politicians to help Atlanta maintain its status as a world-class city. While financial backing is necessary for political gain, none of Atlanta’s
last five mayors have had the full support of Buckhead power brokers, thus displaying the influence that middle and working-class black voters have on city officials (Monroe 2010).

Atlanta’s black political presence rivals cities with a similarly large black population. Southern cities like Birmingham with a large black population were divided along racial lines, and the economics of the city suffered because of it (Kunerth 1988). Cities like Chicago and Los Angeles are similar to Atlanta, boasting a large African-American population with a significant racial history. However, Chicago did not elect its first black mayor until Harold Washington in 1983. In addition, the city’s current mayor and 53% of Cook County Commissioners, Chicago’s largest county, are non-black. Los Angeles elected its first mayor in the same year as Atlanta; however, the trend of black mayors ended in 1993 after the LA riots, while Atlanta’s trend still continues to this day. Los Angeles’ mayor and 80 percent of the Los Angeles County, the city’s largest county, is non-black. Washington D.C. should be credited for having a black mayoral tradition that comes the closest to Atlanta’s. Since 1975, when the district elected its first mayor, all of its mayors have been African American. However, after exploring the rest of its governing body, less power is in the hands of African Americans. Currently, only 43 percent of the council members and chairmen are black. Therefore, less than half of the entire governing body of Washington D.C. is in the hands of nonwhites, while Atlanta’s three governing bodies are each 50-100 percent controlled by African Americans.

According to the Kunerth from the Orlando Sentinel (1988), “the trademark of Atlanta politics is that race relations were never allowed to interfere with the city’s economic development.” It can be argued that cross-racial coalitions were motivated by pragmatism and financial gain as opposed to a sincere quest for justice and equality. Regardless of the motive, Atlanta became a booming city as a result. Tim Crimmins, history professor at Georgia State
University (GSU) claims, “Atlanta, beginning in the late ’60s and early ’70s, set up mechanisms to bring black and white leaders together to create bridges over the racial gaps that existed for so long, (Kunerth 1988).” This level of black political power has led to major economic moves for the city, including Atlanta’s hosting of the 1996 Olympics, and an upsurge in minority owned business contracts leading to a significant increase in black middle-class neighborhoods.

Black politics was largely instrumental in ushering a new wave of black and foreign businesses to the city. Maynard Jackson’s push for minority contractors during his expansion of Hartsfield Jackson airport opened the door for minority-owned companies (Dingle 2009). Former Mayor and Ambassador Andrew Young helped bring 500 new companies, economic infrastructure and jobs to the city. With housing prices being relatively low in Atlanta, people migrated from places like New York to get a jumpstart at a better life in the south. Deidre Oakley, professor at GSU, claims she’s met more people from New York in Atlanta than she did while living in New York (Jones 2017). More opportunities and people meant more businesses and clientele.

Economics plays a huge role in Atlanta’s position as a black mecca. In 1987, Atlanta was home to six corporations on Black Enterprises’ 1984 List of Top 100 Black Businesses. In addition, it housed a major black bank and insurance company (Jaret 1987). In the late 2000’s, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that Georgia ranks second behind Washington D.C. as having the highest percentage of black-owned businesses in the nation, with many of these businesses operating in the city of Atlanta. Boston and Ross (1997) examined predominately black areas in Atlanta and found that 85% of employees in black-owned businesses were African American. While black-owned businesses began to rise in the latter half of the twentieth century, Atlanta appears to usher in a new and improved wave of black business owners. Boston and Ross (1997)
claim that this new entrepreneur is young, well-educated and nontraditional. In Atlanta, these new entrepreneurs boast an employment pool that is 80% black, while their customers or clientele is 62% non-African American. These numbers show that the new Atlanta black business leaders are providing services to the larger city, while using the profits to create opportunities within their own communities. Boston argues that governmental support of black-owned businesses will decrease black unemployment and mitigate economic burden in the inner city.

The number of black millionaires began to increase in Atlanta as a result of black/white business ventures in the post-Civil Rights era. In 1985, the city was reported to have the largest concentration of known black millionaires in the nation (Jaret 1987), a record that existed well into the 2000’s (Bullard Johnson and Torres 2010). In most U.S. cities, African American professionals are forced to integrate with white communities in order to live the middle-class lifestyle. However, Atlanta’s black middle-class communities are unique. Henry Louis Gates finds it commonplace to view African American Atlanta communities that have homes valued at $300,000-$500,000. He states, “But in Atlanta, African Americans are able to choose the lifestyle they want to live and the color in which they wish to live it (Gates 2004).” Unlike many other cities, black Atlantans do not have to live in a predominately white community to live a middle-class lifestyle. Gates claims that Atlanta is a unique city in that it allows African Americans to progress in class status while maintaining their “blackness.”

Atlanta’s image as a “black mecca” can be seen in its ability to maintain itself as a political, economic and social powerhouse. While other cities may lead the nation in one or two categories, Atlanta has proven exceptional due to its leadership in all three. As a key city in the reverse migration trend, the black middle and upper-class residents got the best of both worlds:
economic progression and cultural connectivity. Moving to the South became a representation of a desire to connect culturally to their people. After the “success” of the Civil Rights Movement, Atlanta became known as “the city that was too busy to hate (Dameron and Murphy 1997).” However, Dameron and Murphy (1997) found that amidst the large cultural diversity boasted by Atlanta leaders, many public agencies and organizations largely ignored the class differences that exist between the various subgroups in Atlanta.

2.6 The Atlanta Paradox

According to a 2015 Washington post article, Mark Berman writes “Congratulations to Atlanta, which for the second year in a row has been declared the most unequal city in the United States (Berman 2015).” Although Atlanta boasts economic and population increase, large levels of class divisions still plague the city. Even with a bustling middle class, the incidence of poverty is higher in Atlanta than most cities in the country (Headley 1998 see Jones 1978). In 1987, Charles Jaret found that although Atlanta ranked high in the number of newcomers and black net migration, which contributed to its black mecca image, living conditions and opportunities in Atlanta are not substantially better here than anywhere else. In 2004, Atlanta had one of the higher child poverty rates at 48.1 percent. In 2008, 20.8 percent of black families, as opposed to 7.4 percent of white families fell below the poverty line (Bullard Johnson and Torres 2010). In 2008, the median income for whites was $86,156, while blacks’ median income was $29,033 (Bullard Johnsnon and Torres 2010). According to a New York Times article published in 2013, climbing the income ladder occurs less often in the Southeast and Midwest than other regions of the country (Leonhardt 2013). Census data shows that 25% of Atlanta residents lived below the poverty line between 2009 and 2013 (Kotkin 2015). By 2015, the wealthier households made at least twenty times more than the income of the poorest residents.
Residents in the 95th percentile had a household income of $288,159, while poor residents in the 20th percentile had a household income of $14,988 (Kotkin 2015). This data reminds readers that rising income for the rich does not always result in lifting incomes at the bottom, contributing to the black mecca’s position as the most unequal city in the nation (Bertrand 2015).

Limited income mobility is one of the strongest factors that influence the gap between poor and rich in Atlanta. Scholars claim that areas with more black residents, more urban sprawl and higher commutes were likely to have limited or worse upward income mobility. Race is a factor since blacks tend to have lower income and more limited social mobility than whites (Bertrand 2015). However, these factors also had a negative effect on whites as well as blacks. Atlanta meets all of these descriptions with a population that is largely made up of black residents and continues to rank high in congestion and traffic (Kotkin 2015).

In addition to the income gap, Atlanta was placed at the bottom of cities where residents were more likely to move from poorest income bracket to richest (Kotkin 2015). Socioeconomic mobility from low to middle-income status is easier in places like Boston and New York, than Atlanta. In Atlanta, one of the biggest concerns related to concentrated poverty is that a weak public transit system makes it difficult to get to job opportunities (Leonhardt 2013). Between 1999 and 2008, Atlanta’s median household income dropped by $2,241, and the city reports a lack of middle-class jobs (Bertrand 2015). Only 11.3 percent of Metro Atlanta’s jobs are located within a 3-mile radius of the CBD and 61.9 percent are located outside of a 10-mile ring. Having a car can mean the difference between some or no income. Unfortunately, 35 percent of black Atlantans do not own cars (Bullard and Johnson and Torres 2010).

While there are high levels of income inequality in Atlanta, Georgia State University professor, David Sjoquist calls attention to the 2014 Brookings study (Berube 2014) that claims
Atlanta as the top city for income inequality. He argues that the research only considers 8.2 percent of Atlanta’s MSA population. For the 50 cities included in the study, the researchers included on average 33.2 percent of their MSA population. Sjoquist claims that if we factor in a larger MSA percentage for Atlanta, one that is comparable to the other cities, then the level of income inequality in the city and metro areas may yield different results. A newer Center for State and Local Finance (CSLF) report found that income inequality in the city of Atlanta is not a reflection of that in the larger Atlanta metropolitan area. Sjoquist claims that the issue of income inequality has serious implications, but the problem does not lie with overall income inequality, but the level of concentrated inequality in inner city of Atlanta. This report shows that once larger metro areas of Atlanta are included, issues of income inequality are not as dire as they are in the city of Atlanta. In 2014, Atlanta exhibited the largest gap between city and metro areas, with high-income households earning 17.5 times more than lower earning households. These numbers are twice the disparity seen in the metro area (Holmes and Berube 2016). By 2016, Atlanta dropped to third in cities with the highest levels of income inequality.

Research shows that homeownership is a key indicator of wealth (Shapiro 2003). Roughly 50% of metro Atlanta’s black population owned their homes in 2013 (Kotkin 2015). This number far exceeds the major metro average homeownership population, which staggers at 38%. Atlanta’s housing and neighborhoods are some of the most sought after in its region. Even with this trend, the city still contains some of the metro area’s poorest communities. Research shows that upward mobility is significantly lower in cities with high sprawl than more compact cities (Ewing Hamidi Grace and Wei 2016). High levels of inequality have correlations with high sprawl cities like Atlanta where the expansion of populations moves away from central urban city and into more car-dependent suburban areas. With fewer resources in these areas, the
suburbs do not directly equate to middle class, therefore displaying high levels of poverty. This is an example of a long history of race and urban migration in what many scholars refer to as the *suburbanization of poverty* (Berube and Holmes 2016).

Instead of addressing the issue of race related poverty in the inner city, Atlanta city developers and politicians used gentrification efforts to move the “problem” from the inner city to the suburbs, so the downtown area could further attract visitors and business investors. African Americans made up about 61 percent of Atlanta in 2000. In 2010, they made up 54 percent of the population. Deirdre Oakley attributes this change to gentrification, with Atlanta being the fifth most gentrified city in the nation. Redevelopment of Underground Atlanta and a 1.5 billion-dollar Mercedez-Benz football stadium will also help to gentrify black, low-income neighborhoods (Jones 2017). With a large percentage of black middle-class residents living in the metropolitan areas, we see working class, working poor, and middle-class blacks in closer residential proximity. This migration of the black poor to suburban Atlanta confirms Patillo’s claim that the black middle class and black working class share many of the same social institutions including churches, schools, and hospitals. My research addresses this claim within the context of Atlanta as a “black mecca” and its effects on racial identity and response to systemic racism.

In most U.S. cities, the structural limitations placed on blacks in housing and education as well as mobility, low employment and income levels makes it difficult to live among black people, while simultaneously achieving socioeconomic mobility. Lacy (2007) found that the average black middle-class neighborhood is changing. Although it may have a large black population, white working and middle-class neighborhoods surround them. However, the city of Atlanta is unique because African Americans can reach middle-class status and still be
surrounded by black people, businesses and institutions. Although the racial meaning of middle class may be different in Atlanta, the same story of gentrification, suburbanization of poverty, class division and income inequality persists here and in other major U.S cities. This change in the geographical and demographical layout of the black middle class may have significant implications in the cultural identity of its residents. This same juxtaposed relationship between racial progress and economic inequality is evident in the United States, making Atlanta a microcosm of larger inequality issues that deserve careful consideration when examining race and class. The city’s distinct characteristics lead me to question whether the same racial identity themes, boundary negotiation processes and concepts of class division found in previous research holds true in this city. This research also advances the discourse by examining how city leaders and institutions have reinforced economic inequality and helped blacks construct a racial and/or class identity. My research addresses these identity constructions and class disparities that may be unique to Atlanta and the effects they can have on intraracial interaction, the African American response to systemic racism and the way blacks view the city as a “Black Mecca.” I address the questions: How is this polarizing of the black community affecting its title as a “black mecca?” Is the class disparity meaningful to how respondents feel about the city as a black mecca? I recognize this distinctiveness and my research addresses these identity constructions and class disparities that may be unique to Atlanta and the effects they can have on intraracial interaction, African American response to systemic racism and the way blacks view the city as a “black mecca.”
3 METHODOLOGY

My study examines thirty-four Black/African American Atlanta residents who identify as working or middle class. I analyze the data collected through in-depth interviews to understand the various ways black middle and working-class residents in Atlanta understand race, class and the city as a Black Mecca.

3.1 Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured in-depth interview is a qualitative methodology used to gather data from the subject’s perspective. The purpose of in-depth interviews is to understand peoples’ lived experiences. Through this methodology, social science researchers are able to discover the way people make sense of the world around them (Seidman 2006). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) state, “The expressive power of language provides the most important resource for accounts” (p.126). The purpose of in-depth interviews is to go deeper into the human experience and observe how and why phenomena occur. I employ the unstructured interview method as a major research methodology because I seek to understand the way Blacks in Atlanta understand race, class and the city as a Black Mecca. In addition, I explore why these feelings may exist and offer solutions to the social problems that may arise in the research.

In-depth interviews are often used when discussing sensitive topics such as race or socioeconomic status. This method allows researchers to access the experiences of marginalized groups such as women, LGBT, people of color and low-income residents (Hesse Biber 2014). Scholars exploring systemic racism theory and the white racial frame have used in-depth interviews as a way of analyzing race and/or class (Feagin 1991; Wingfield 2008; Chou 2012; Evans 2013; Feagin 2013).
3.2 Sampling

In order to find participants for the study, I use a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. An initial post is made on various social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The post informs people about the study and requirements for participants. Requirements include: identifying as Black or African American, being 23 years of age or older, living in Atlanta, Ga or any of the surrounding metropolitan areas, and identifying as working or middle class. I also send emails to academic listservs explaining the study and requirements. Utilizing a snowball method, I encourage respondents to share information about this study with those who may be interested and leave contact information for willing participants.

3.3 Definition of Class

Research on the black middle class uses socioeconomic factors such as income, education, and occupation to determine a respondent’s middle-class status (Hodge and Treiman 1968; Bjorklund and Jantii 1997; Lacy 2007). The income to needs ratio is one measure used by researchers to determine if an individual is middle class. This measure states that if a family earns two times the federal poverty level income based on family size, then they are considered middle class (Burkhauser, Couch and Wittenberg 1996; Vandewater, Shim and Caplovitz 2004). According to Pew Research, middle class is defined as households with earnings of 67%-200% of a state’s median income (Elkins 2016). The median household income for Georgia was $51,244 in 2015. Therefore, my research places Atlanta’s middle-class income range between $34,333 and $102,488. In order to account for family size, I use the income to needs ratio as a subsequent measure for middle-class status. If a respondent reports living in a household or is part of a family equal to or higher than the median household or family income, then she/he likely acquires many of the benefits of a middle-class family. They are likely to live in a middle-
class neighborhood, attend a school in that neighborhood and adopt characteristics and behaviors that are in line with middle-class status. In addition to income threshold and family size, I examine each person’s subjective class identity. They are asked which class she/he feels they belong to. This question helps determine variances between perceived class reality and actual class status.

Class is a social factor that is difficult to identify and remains fluid. Some people may have a middle-class education, but lack the income and occupation that is consistent with a middle-class lifestyle. Those respondents may be characterized as college students. Subjects who are in college and in the process of transferring to a wealthier class are categorized based on their class status at the time of the interview. However education, parental class status, and history of class mobility are important variables to consider when assessing a person’s racial and class identity. All of these variables are analyzed within the larger discussion of racial and class identity in Atlanta.

Alongside median household income and educational attainment, occupation is also used as a way to define middle-class status. White-collar jobs are occupations related to office work or professional settings. Typically, these jobs require higher education or some form of post high school training. In this research, I define middle class as individuals who meet two out of the three following descriptions: are a part of a family household where the median income ranges between $34,333 and $102,488 and is two times the federal poverty level based on family size, are employed in a white-collar occupation and have acquired some college education (Durant and Louden 1986). After employing this method, there were a few respondents whose class status was still ambiguous. For those cases, I entered there information into the class calculator found on the Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends website. The mechanism
determined the respondent’s class status based on income, family size and state in which they lived. I used that calculation to determine the income portion of class identity, while also assessing their education and occupation to determine their overall class identity.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical concepts we discussed have helped to shape our understanding of race, class and identity within black communities. To advance our knowledge on this topic, I employ systemic racism theory and internalized racism as two additional frameworks that can be used to shed light on the way African American across classes negotiate multiple identities and interact with each other and the society at large.

3.4.1 Theoretical Perspective: Systemic Racism Theory

The first theoretical perspective I use to help analyze race, class and identity in Atlanta is systemic racism theory. This theory is a social science concept that explains the foundational and perpetuating structures along with the operations that help race and racism exist while developing U.S. America both past and present (Feagin 2013). Using an historical framework, this theory examines race and racism’s hegemonic force in society. Systemic racism theory explains the ways racism operates on the structural level, and exposes the societal institutions and networks that consciously and subconsciously reinforce racism (Feagin 2013).

 Critics of systemic racism theory claim that we live in a post-racial/color-blind society and use the expansion of the black middle class as evidence that race is no longer an issue in this country (Thernstrom 1999). William Julius Wilson (1978) argues that improving economic conditions and civil rights laws that rid our nation of overt racism resulted in an increasing black middle class. However, Feagin (1991) found that the black middle class experience discrimination in very unique ways. In public accommodations and in the work place, the black
middle class has to navigate racism in ways similar to the black working class. Feagin (1991) also explains middle-class blacks’ economic advantage and the ways money and professional networks can be used to combat racism and advance justice. Minorities regardless of class can feel the effects of racism; therefore, systemic racism is a framework necessary to understand the way race is continually reinforced throughout all of our social structures.

The notion of the “white racial frame” is one of the key elements of the systemic racism theory and is held by many whites and some minorities (Feagin 2007, p. 8). The white racial frame views whites as having a superior culture, while people of color maintain an inferior standing. With respects to social institutions, the white racial frame makes it normal to believe that social institutions are white-controlled. Also, whites believe that local schools and other public accommodations are run by whites, normalized by whites, and put in place for the benefit of whites. Whites or minorities who have adopted the white racial frame never question the privilege and dominant position of whites (Picca and Feagin 2007).

Systemic racism theory explains how laws, social institutions, housing, and other structural mechanisms within society affect African American Atlantans across class lines. My research explores the ways black middle and working-class residents interpret and combat these systemic forms of racism. Through interviews, I examine respondents’ racial narratives, ideas and interpretations of white superiority (Feagin 2013) to explain how systemic forms of racism shape African American’s white racial frame.

3.4.2 Theoretical Perspective: Internalized Racism

Internalized racism is a form of systemic oppression that teaches African Americans to fear their own power and difference (Bivens 1995). It is the medium that perpetuates all forms of racism and inequality (Pyke 2010). Many scholars who study racial self-image concepts like
internalized oppression focus on the psychological theories without considering the macro sociological factors (such as class and race) that contribute to personal reflection and racial group identity (Porter and Washington 1979). In my research, I examine patterns of internalized racism within the narratives of black middle and working-class residents. This theoretical framework addresses the ways systemic racism and intraracial division affect the personal and social identity of African Americans.

Internalized racism is a result of structural inequalities, although it has class implications. Systemic racism has created concentrated neighborhood effects in predominately black neighborhoods (Wilson 1987, Sampson 2012). With concentrated poverty, concentrated crime, and poor education being intensely focused in mostly black neighborhoods (Wilson 1987, Massey Gross and Shibuya 1994), it becomes inevitable for African Americans who seek upward mobility to separate from these conditions. Some black middle-class persons end up separating themselves from the black working class and poor because of the inextricable link between blackness and poverty (Graglia 2001). In escaping negative social conditions, they are also separating themselves from perceived blackness. Members of various minority groups tend to distance themselves from poor or working class members that perpetuate non-white behaviors (Delgado 2014). This separation can reinforce the white superiority complex of the white racial frame (Feagin 2013) and produce effects of internalized racism through class division.

Bivens (1995) describes four categories of internalized racism: decision-making, naming the problem, resources and standards. Decision-making describes people of color who agree that whites are more equipped to solve problems within one’s racial group than their own members. They are more comfortable with white leaders, than leaders of color. Naming the problem occurs when people of color place blame on victims of racism without considering how
structures play a role in life outcomes for minorities. These individuals may argue that rise in crime is the result of criminal behavior as opposed to the decline in job opportunities in majority minority communities. The lack of employment may be a catalyst for the rise in crime, yet some minorities may conclude that blacks are prone to illicit activity. Resources describe the way people of color reject notions of cooperative economics and support of minority owned businesses. Instead, they see these responses as racist and encourage people to economically support all groups regardless of race. Culturally specific institutions like Telemadrid, BET or HBCUs may be viewed as insignificant, sub standard or outdated. Standards show how people of color maintain white standards of beauty and values, while demeaning aesthetics and traditions that are unique to their culture. White standards are deemed normal for both white and non-white members of society (Bivens 1995). These four categories are examples of the way internalized racism is illustrated in the ideas, thoughts and actions of minority groups. In my interview transcripts, I find examples of these four descriptions in order to assess the way internalized racism is carried out within black working and middle-class groups.

3.4.3 Intersectionality

Although both racialized theoretical perspectives are used to examine race and class identities among African Americans in Atlanta, I also understand that the intersection of sexuality and gender are significant when exploring multiple social constructions. Theories such as black feminist thought and intersectionality thought provide a framework for assessing these social correlations.

Black feminist thought is a theoretical framework that accounts for the unique experiences of women of color. It articulates the knowledge of African American women that many times get taken for granted (Collins 1989), and can be used as a form of oppression. Black
feminist thought is an ideological and practical reaction to intersecting forms of oppression explained in intersectionality (Collins 2002). While it challenges the larger systemic issues of oppression, it can also be used to find solutions when faced with both inter and intra-group conflict (Burack 2001).

Intersectionality describes the way social identities such as race, class, sexuality and gender overlap to explain discrimination and disadvantage. The sum of these experiences offers a greater understanding than simply exploring each construction in isolation (Crenshaw 1989, 1991. These mutually created features of social organization particularly shape the experiences of black women, and in turn are shaped by black women (Collins 2000 p. 299). As scholars use intersectionality to understand the way social locations inform each other, they also help readers understand how interconnecting forms of oppression can intensify existing forms of racism, sexism, etc. Patricia Hill-Collins calls this phenomenon the matrix of domination. This concept explains the overall organization of power in society and the way it intersects to reinforce oppression (Collins 2000). Intersectionality remains a significant concept in my analysis as I explore the crossroads between race, class and life in the urban south.

Intersectionality is commonly used to tackle themes that deal with multiple social identities clearly addressing gender. While intersectionality initially explored the relationship between race and gender, less attention is focused on the way its themes such as matrices of oppression, intersecting forms of domination, and social movements can be applied to the race/class dynamic. My research fills this gap by using intersectionality to understand race/class relationships without explicitly concentrating on gender. While systemic racism and internalized oppression offer a more comprehensive perspective of race and class, intersectionality and black feminist thought can also explain the specific ways overlapping social constructions may impact
the research participants and their understanding of race and class in Atlanta.

Differences in regions, identity constructions, behaviors, and class categories can create divisions within both black middle and working-class groups, though they reside in the same geographical spaces. While the vast amount of research on race and class continue to highlight the disadvantaged, some authors have dedicated their careers to changing that narrative. Still, most of the research on the black middle class is situated outside of the core South, although a large number of the black population now reside in this region. Zandria Robinson comes closer by analyzing race and class in a Post Soul City like Memphis. However, Atlanta is a city that is very different from Memphis and is worth observing within the context of race and class. With a much larger black population, larger black academic higher educational institutions, higher percentage of black businesses and a longer history of black politics, it is evident that an examination of Atlanta can offer additional insight into this dialogue of race and class that will not be found in any other city. Unlike most of the previous cities studied, Atlanta is a place where the color of middle class is not white, but black, thus creating a reality of race and class that is different from any other major city in the United States. In order to situate this city and its intraracial conflict within the larger issues of inequality, I explore the way race and class conflict has historically impacted U.S. society as a whole. Then later, I will assess how Atlanta’s cultural, social and geospatial structures help make it a unique testing site for race and class in our society.

3.5 Age

According to *The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends*, by 2006, 68.5 percent of students entering college were 18 years of age. On average, it takes a student 55 months to finish a four-year degree. Using this data, I round up and interview subjects who are equal to or over
the age of 23. This gives the subject enough time to graduate college and continue the path towards class mobility. The age range of the respondents was 23-84.

3.6 Recruitment Methods

In order to recruit respondents for my research, I created a post on social media advertising the study. Over seventy people shared the post and I received approximately half of my participants through tags and shares on social media. This result shocked and also reminded me of how impactful and effective social media can be in recruitment efforts for social science research. Subsequently, participants would reach out to friends, colleagues and associates who would also express interest in being apart of the study. Although social media was a useful tool in recruiting participants, I noticed that because I identify as middle class, and most of my social media network was middle class, then most of the people who responded to the post were also middle class. This was a self-reflexive moment because this was the first time I realized that the people who I interact with the most on social media are mostly young, professionals who have achieved higher education and are settled in some white collar job—the black middle class.

Because a majority of my social networks were a reflection of my class identity, I had to employ additional methods of recruitment in order to get a more diverse sample size. In addition to social media, I sent emails and letters to organizations and institutions that may have members and/or students that fit study requirements. This strategy is common in sociological and psychological research. Historically, the black church has been a centerfold institution for the black community and a meeting place where African Americans across classes can commune, fellowship and worship. Previous research exploring race and class, specifically in Atlanta, focuses on black churches, schools and fraternal societies as key locations for community building and identity constructions in the black community (Dorsey 2004, Warnock 2013,
Abrams 2014). There are a large number of churches in the Atlanta and metro area. I used a computer number generator to develop a random sample in order to recruit from black churches. I sent out emails to those churches in order to gain participants for my study. Also after each interview, I encourage participants to connect me with their closest church/religious organization, social organization, fraternal group, or neighborhood association in order to begin recruiting subjects in these places. Through the churches, I was put in contact with the Concerned Black Clergy which is an organization comprised mostly of African American ministers and laity who provide leadership advocacy and service to people in the Atlanta community. They allowed me to present my research at a local meeting, and soon after I was able to secure several people who were interested in being a part of the research study.

Most research subjects were from Fulton, DeKalb and Cobb counties. According to the American Community Survey of 2009-2013 and the United States Census Bureau, Fulton County maintained the highest level of inequality in the city with a Gini index of (.539), followed by Dekalb (.487) and Cobb (.455). These large levels of income inequality are found in counties that (Pooley 2015) labels historically black (Fulton and Southern Dekalb) or nearing majority black (Cobb). The less black the county, the lower the levels of inequality. In relation to inequality within racial groups, city statistics show that Fulton County’s black residents make up 70 percent of the poorest population (household income less than $10,000), and only 9 percent of the wealthiest percentile (household income greater than $200,000). Using the same numbers in DeKalb County, the poorest population is 64 percent black, while the wealthiest population is 12 percent black. In Cobb County, blacks make up 41 percent of the poorest population and 9 percent of the wealthiest group. Results show that similar outcomes of class inequality seen between racial groups are also a reflection of the income inequality within racial
groups. This intersection of race and class inequality within specific counties is worth examining and my research explores the racial and class identities of people in these counties.

3.7 Interview Process

Once a person shows interest in being a part of the study, I follow up with the individual and ensure they meet the basic requirements. Upon completion of the follow-up, a date, time and place is agreed upon for the formal interview. The full interview takes place in person at a specified location. An interview guide is used to help ensure that I asked questions related to the research topics. If a time and place does not work for our schedule, we conducted the interview over the phone. All full interviews are audio-recorded for later transcription. After the interview, I review the purpose of the research, the analysis. I also change all names to protect the identity of the subjects.

3.8 Coding

After the interview has been conducted and transcribed, I begin the coding process identifying and categorizing passages and phrases into common themes (Gibbs 2007). In this research study, I employ Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) method of coding to answer the research questions. In order to properly code the text, I read through the transcribed data with my research concerns in mind and only extract texts that are relevant to my topic. Within these texts, I further examine repeating ideas and the relationship these concepts have with my research concerns. All repeating ideas that have something in common are grouped into a larger theme, and similar themes are categorized into theoretical constructs. After understanding these constructs, I create narratives that explain the relationship between my research concerns and the subjects’ experiences. Participants’ words are used to help bridge the gap between life
experiences and science, while answering my research questions and constructing conclusions (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003).

To analyze the level of internalized racism in black middle and working-class residents, I use Donna Bivens’ (1995) definition of internalized racism. Evidence from the transcripts is categorized into four themes: decision making, resources, blaming the victim and naming the problem. Once transcripts have been properly categorized using these themes, interpretation, and a racial analysis, I describe the key results in the findings chapter of my dissertation.

3.9 Summary of Findings

I conducted thirty-four interviews with African American/Black metro Atlanta residents. Nine of the interviewees are men and twenty-five are women. However, twenty-five respondents were middle class men and women, and nine were working-class men and women. Participants varied in county residents and regions where they grew up. Sixteen were from Fulton county, six were from DeKalb county, three were from Cobb County, three were from Gwinnett county, one was from Tucker county, one was from Henry county, one was from Alpharetta, one was from Smyrna, one was from Forsyth and one was from Clayton. Eleven respondents were Atlanta natives and twenty-three respondents were transplants from other parts of the United States. Twelve transplants were from the southern region of the United States. Six transplants were from the Midwest. Three transplants were from the East Coast. One transplant was from California and one transplant was unidentified. The average age of the participants who disclosed their age is 43 years old with a range from 23-84 years of age. Only one participant did not give their age.

In-person meetings were conducted in public spaces such as libraries, cafes, etc. Some meetings were also conducted in the homes of participants. All other interviews were done over
the phone. Each interview lasted between 50 minutes and approximately 3 hours. Pseudonyms are given to all respondents to conceal their identity. In the following chapters, I shorten quotations and add some punctuation to increase readability. However, none of the participants’ words or meaning was changed in the writing of this manuscript.

Participants were asked about their experiences regarding race and their racial identity. I went into further details by asking their opinions on structural issues that uniquely affect black Americans such as police discrimination, unemployment, and poverty. In addition, respondents were also asked about their relationship with people within and outside their class group. Lastly, participants were asked about their perceptions on the city of Atlanta as a “Black Mecca.” I covered details about black-owned businesses in Atlanta, educational institutions and political leadership.

In the following chapter, readers see how black people across class, gender, and regional identities experience racism and negotiate racial identity. Often times, a black woman’s relationship with her hair is her first understanding of race and racial identity. Conversely, black men’s relationship with the police is often seen as the first time he recognizes that his race is a factor in terms of social interaction. Although racialized experiences vary between social identities, most of them fell into one of three categories: Explicit racism, Internalized racism and Microaggressions, with the latter often taking place in the workplace or classroom.

Chapter 5 explores in more detail the intraracial division and internalized racism that can exist in the black community. Using Donna Bivens’ Internalized Racism (IR) frames, participants that exhibit internalized racism often fall into the Standards and Naming the Problem categories. Black people who practice colorism often see white standards of beauty as dominant over other races. In addition, many participants named other blacks as the problem for their lack
of success, or the black community’s ability to liberate themselves from oppression. Because of
the unique experiences of blacks in Atlanta, many participants did not suffer from the last two IR
frames, Resources and Decisions Making. However, I argue for three additional frames to
consider when discussing internalized racism among blacks: lack of a systemic analysis,
assumptions, and generalizations.

Chapter 6 explains that perceptions of systemic issues that are specific to the black
experience were not unique to a certain gender or class. However, some participants likened
larger racial issues to structural impediments in the system, and others felt that these problems
were a result of the behavior of black people. In addition to race issues, respondents across
classes looked at the working class as people who live in poor neighborhoods, or live-in single
parent homes. Middle-class blacks are sometimes seen as people who are bougie, stuck up and
arrogant. However, other blacks see them as being the group that can lead the race to an
improved social situation. While middle class blacks have a certain class privilege that can make
life easier than it is for the working class or poor, they are often pressured to carry the burden of
the race on their shoulders. Race and racism can be the catalyst for blacks experiencing
downward social mobility, thus many of them may not be as philanthropic as others would
suggest because they are in constant fear of losing everything due to their racial disadvantage.

Chapter 7 explores two sides of Atlanta, the Black Mecca, and the Other Side of the
Black Mecca. The first side introduces readers to the economically privileged, cosmopolitan,
intellectually challenging and bustling life of the black middle class in Atlanta. However, there
is another side of the city that is filled with poverty crime and racism. It appears that racism is
not found in the city of Atlanta (often seen as the area inside of high way 285). However, in the
suburbs, many blacks can be subject to racist taunts and actions. Although according to
respondents, racism may not be prevalent in Atlanta, there is a certain hierarchy that exists among the citizens of the city, making it very difficult to integrate certain Atlanta social circles. I went into this study with the assumption that the black working class and black middle class would have two separate views of Atlanta as a Black Mecca. However results show that, not class but place of birth was the social identifier that separated Atlanta perceptions. City transplants across classes appeared to see Atlanta as a kind of Promised Land for black folks and a mecca for anyone who wanted to experience upward mobility; Atlanta natives across classes often reported not seeing Atlanta as a Black Mecca. Many of them felt that Atlanta needed to do more to help the underclass and working class achieve mobility.

Chapter 8 is the beginning of my Black Meccanism section. In this section I assess the way Black Meccanisms, city institutions that help to maintain Atlanta’s Black Mecca status, are perceived by Atlanta residents. The first Black Meccanism I explore is the Atlanta University Center (AUC). It is a consortium of black colleges that have been the vehicle for producing some of the city’s and world’s top civic leaders, entertainers, creatives and religious leaders. While blacks across classes see this place as a symbol of greatness and pride, other participants are convinced that is a place where young Atlantans learn to distance themselves from people within their racial group. One major critique of the AUC is its ability to train future leaders, yet its perpetual disengagement with the larger and often poorer Atlanta urban black community.

In Chapter 9, I explore the last two Black Meccanisms in this study, Atlanta’s business culture and Atlanta politics. Although the larger perception of blacks is that we do not support our own businesses, my study found that all participants felt cooperative economics was necessary and will patronize black-owned businesses despite the challenges that may come with it. Atlanta’s politics, often revered because of the high number of black people in political
power, is also seen as a cover up for the larger white businesses that are believed to control the black politicians. While this perception exists, many respondents still see the value in black politicians and a large majority of them do participate in the voting process and use it as a vehicle for change.

In the final chapter, I present the primary option participants offer as a solution to the race and class divide in Atlanta. While the city is known for its large black middle class, Atlanta also suffers from major class inequality, which is often times reinforced through the city’s politics and higher academic institutions. In order to combat these class issues, educational equality on the K-12 level is seen as the key to help people create a much more egalitarian community and help make Atlanta the Black Mecca it can truly be. Lastly, I recognize the limitations in my study and provide implications for further research.
4 RACE IS STILL A FACTOR

Since the election of President Barack Obama, scholars, pundits and celebrities have argued that we live in a post-racial society (Wise 2009; Redmon 2015), claiming that our country has moved past the notion of race, and inequality based on skin color is a thing of the past (Dowe and Franklin 2016). Since Barack Obama’s first presidential inauguration, research shows that racial prejudice has increased slightly since 2008. After assessing explicit racial attitudes and implicit experimental testing, 51 percent of Americans display racist anti-black attitudes compared to 48 percent shown in a similar survey in 2008 suggesting that racist ideas have increased since Obama’s presidency (Potok 2013).

Popular culture and media depicts the harsh realities of racism. In 2014, the NBA banned Donald Sterling, owner of the NBA team Los Angeles Clippers, for life due to racist remarks he made about African Americans. Race-themed college parties where students would dress in stereotypical racist clothing also became popular in recent years. This trend led to the creation of the movie Dear White People, which addressed issues of race and racism on predominately white college campuses. Presidential candidate, Donald Trump has arguably been the most outlandish example of racism in popular media due to his remarks about minority groups during his election campaign trail. During his campaign for president, Donald Trump’s racist remarks became an ongoing conversation piece among news anchors. On several occasions, he labeled and generalized African Americans as “the blacks”. Another story reported Trump threatening to deport all Muslims and build a wall to keep out Mexican immigrants. The election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States shows that explicit racism is either still widely accepted in the minds of citizens across the country or is a characteristic many are willing to overlook when choosing a president.
Although these previous cases are examples of the significance of race in modern-day society, one of the most popular responses to contemporary racism is the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement. In recent years, the deaths of several young black men and women has exacerbated the tension between the black community and law enforcement. The unjust murders of Oscar Grant, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Eric Garner and others have caused many people to question whether we truly live in a post-racial society. While many victims of police malfeasance come from poor and working-class families, the black middle class experience these same issues (Feagin 1991). In 2009, the police arrested Henry Louis Gates, an African American studies professor from Harvard University, after trying to enter his own house. Campus police officers approached and assaulted Dr. Ersula Ore, a black professor at Arizona State University, for walking in the middle of the street to avoid construction. Unlike Grant, Stanley-Jones and Garner, Gates and Ore’s experiences with the police did not have a fatal ending. However, these cases support the claim that working and middle-class blacks are subject to negative police harassment and racism.

Academic research, news reports and personal anecdotes support the argument that racism still exists in this country and blacks are typically on the receiving end of racist taunts, implications and actions. In this chapter, I explore the various ways blacks across class and gender identities experience and understand race and racism. All thirty-four participants report experiencing some level of racism in their lives. Although anti-black racism crosses color, regional, class and gender identities, data from my research shows that there is a connection between these identities and specific racialized experiences. While most men reported their skin color or interaction with the police as a key symbol of racial difference, most women stated that their hair was a main characteristic of racial identity, in some cases before skin. Although every
participant spoke about experiencing some level of racism, the most popular sites for racism were places of employment and the classroom. Most of the encounters explained by the respondents could fit into three types of racist encounters: microaggressions, explicit racism, and internalized racism.

4.1 Intersection of Race and Gender

4.1.1 I Am not my hair: Woman's racial identifier

A person’s class status can contribute to the way a person identifies with and understands race. Middle-class blacks, because of their economic privilege, may adopt certain racial characteristics not found in working-class blacks. The same conclusion can happen in reverse, as some working-class blacks may accept racial identities that may not exist among middle-class blacks. However, racial identifiers are gendered around specific issues such as beauty, the criminal justice system and unequal education. Of the twenty-five women participants, many of them reported their hair being the first thing they noticed that was different from their white counterparts. Jameka is a 32-year-old middle-class black woman from North Carolina who grew up around both whites and blacks. When she was a child, she would go to the pool with her white friends. It was at this moment that she realized that it was not her skin that separated her from her white friends, but her hair:

My hair was actually the first thing that made me realize I was different, which is weird. For black women, it’s kind of like our hair is like our first indication that we’re different…. I knew I was different… I knew when my friends went to the pool, because I loved to swim. When my friends went to the pool, they would put their hair under the water. It would come out looking a certain way. I put my hair under the water. It would look completely different, and my mother would be mad when I would do it. (Mom said) “Why didn’t you put on your cap? Why didn’t you put on your swimming cap?” And she would fuss and yell. And then I realized while they’re (white friends) chilling that night I’m spending all night doing my hair. My mom is.
In African-American culture, mothers can spend hours on their daughter’s hair and in some cases may show anger and frustration if their hard work is in vain. Hair and the social expectations surrounding it can also result in isolation from peers. Jameka introduces us to the life of black girls and their hair. From an early age, it was clear that there was something about her hair that was different from her friends’ hair. Unfortunately, her hair required her to take additional precautions and can sometimes be a barrier for the fun times she wanted to have with her friends.

Three polarizing dynamics are central to most issues related to black hair: natural/unnatural, good/bad hair, and the authentic/inauthentic black (Thompson 2009). In Jameka’s case, she did not report feeling as though her hair was bad or inauthentic, however, it was an obstacle that could stop her from having fun with her white friends, or keep her up at night, while her friends were sleeping or playing. Though she did not fit into any of the three above-mentioned dynamics, black hair was still associated with negative experiences.

For the black women participants, hair was not only a way of separating black girls from white girls, but to divide black girls from other black girls (Mercer 2000; Craig 2002). Early experiences with class identities were shaped by beauty notions and played a key role in black womens’ interactions in working-class neighborhoods. Dr. Kelsey Nordstrom is an Atlanta native and middle-class woman. She recalls growing up as a light skinned girl with long straight “good” hair, and remembers how class and place offered her varying experiences in terms of both race and hair:

So for a long time during my childhood I was in a two-parent home up until age 10, and then things changed drastically when my parents divorced, and it was just my mom. And my dad was physically present, and he did support us, but where we lived changed. So we went from a family neighborhood with brick houses and all this stuff, to like Candler Road. That’s a big adjustment for us growing up and having to fight and defend ourselves. And then dealing with some of the things in childhood around colorism,
which we had not experienced before. And having to fight all the time because you were considered fairer skinned, and your hair was longer and things like that. So that was a quite painful lesson.

Hair drove a wedge between African Americans in Atlanta. According to Kelsey, tension between black girls based on hair did not exist in her middle class lifestyle, but was evident in the disadvantaged neighborhood. Upon experiencing downward mobility, largely due to her parent’s divorce, she found herself getting into fights over her hair. Historically and in the present day, blacks have used the idea of long/good hair versus short and kinky/bad hair as a way of perpetuating the racism and division created and continued by whites, within our own communities (Tate 2007).

Perceptions related to hair can contribute to division within the black community, specifically among black women. For black women, hair was not simply aesthetic, but there was meaning assigned to it. Monique experienced this relationship between hair and meaning during her residency in Atlanta. She is a 33-year-old middle-class woman who is originally from Alabama. However, she moved to Atlanta a few years ago and noticed her relationship with other black women was odd. She states, “I felt like I was resented by other black women especially because I’m not embracing my natural hair or I’m perming hair and I’m not a strong black woman because I don’t want to wear my natural hair”. Unlike Kelsey, Monique had a different experience with hair, which shaped the way people understood her as a black woman. Outside of the aesthetic meaning that European straight “good” hair was better than “black” hair, Monique understood that her straight hair had an opposite meaning in the Black Mecca. Straight hair meant that she was not proud of her heritage and instead wanted to be white.
The black women participants’ relationships with hair as a key racial identifier were not always negative. Rea, a 37-year-old middle-class transplant from Michigan, had this to say about her family and hair:

My family, in it hair was the thing. My mom side was from Louisiana in particular and a lot of them had straight hair. And they could be any shade. But a lot of them had straight hair and my dad side is not that way. So, people would joke and say, “look at your daddy and his sisters”. Like they light skin but they hair so nappy and it was like it was a joke, but fortunately never looked down upon. We always were like happy to be nappy. I never had a perm. Always wore my hair curly natural. I mean I’ve straightened it.

Alexuce is a 31-year-old working-class woman who grew up in Atlanta. Her family is of Jamaican descent and she lives outside the city of Atlanta in DeKalb County. She also recalled having a positive experience as it pertains to her race and hair. In fact, for Alexuce, her family’s response to her hair empowered her:

Respondent: Yeah, on my dad side. They had Rastafarians and they’re very proud to be black, so they always tried to associate embracing blackness like, “why you perming your hair? Why you wearing weave? Be black be proud”.
Interviewer: Did that have a positive effect or a negative effect on you?
Respondent: Positive.
Interviewer: How?
Respondent: In the sense where I didn’t have or go through or I was comfortable being myself. I didn’t feel inadequate when I was around white people. Kinda like I knew who I was and my lane anyway to like the white friends I made. I didn’t have to tone myself down to gaining anything. I could just be myself.

Although Rea’s family joked about certain members having nappy hair\(^3\), she did not feel mistreated or looked at differently because of her hair. Alexuce’s family presented a different side of the hair struggle. While people criticized many participants for not keeping their hair straight, family and friends questioned Alexuce and Monique for looking too European. In other experiences, participants were praised if they looked more European, but with Alexuce and

\(^3\) There is no single definition for the word nappy. However, words like kinky and wild are often used interchangeably with nappy. Sometimes it could be described as so curled so tight that it appears wooly (Lester 1999).
Monique, the more European they looked the less proud they seemed to be about their heritage according to their family and associates. Unlike Monique, Alexuce felt empowered even though long straight hair was not as desirable in her family. Her family critiqued the European style of hair and this approach strengthened her cultural identity and had a positive effect on her. It taught her to appreciate who she was and made her comfortable in herself.

Although women participants reported having negative experiences with their hair, there were no signs of structural discrimination linked to it. However, all girls/women may not be as unfortunate as some of these research participants. Mya and Deanna were two 16-year-old black girls who went to Mystic Valley Regional Charter School just north of Boston. One day, their mother allowed them to wear braided extensions to school. When the girls got to school, authority figures asked them to step out of class and gave them infractions for violating the dress code, which bans hair extensions claiming that they are “distracting”. When the girls refused to take their braids out, authorities removed them from extracurricular activities, barred them from prom and threatened the girls with suspension if they did not change their hair. Other black girls had experienced similar treatment for wearing extensions. Authorities told one student who wore her hair in its natural state that she would need to get it chemically relaxed before returning to school. After the parents reached out to the NAACP and Anti-Defamation league and the school received outside pressure, the institution eventually suspended enforcement of the dress code until the end of the school year. Women research participants, Mya and Deana show how black women go through racism in a unique way. In the past, white society and laws did not allow blacks to express themselves through their hair like other races of women. In the present day, society still punished girls like Mya and Deana for wearing their hair in its natural state or expressing hair styles that are associated with blackness.
4.1.2 Sound of Da Police: Racial identifier for Black Men

While hair is a key racial identifier for black girls and women, interaction with police are often key identifiers for black boys and men’s racialized experiences. Hip Hop pioneer KRS-One wrote a song entitled “Sound of Da Police” that appeared on his 1993 solo album “Return of the Boom Bap”. In this song, he shows how laws have given the role of the overseer on the so-called slave plantation to the modern-day officer. Instead of controlling blacks with whips, they use guns to regulate black behavior and enforce white supremacy and oppression. He even sheds light on the syntax of both words. The word officer sounds like it could be a derivative of the word overseer. Black men across the United States can relate to the words of KRS-One, as African Americans are more likely to see police misconduct than other races regardless of socioeconomic status (Weitzer 1999; Weitzer 2002; Weitzer and Brunson 2015:140). Low-income blacks are disproportionately victims of police brutality, contributing to their negative view of the police, while middle-class African Americans tend to have more favorable attitudes towards the police (Murty et al., 1990; Weitzer and Tuch 2004). The men in my study confirmed some of these findings. Jermaine states that in addition to being a fair-skinned brother with “good hair”, his dealing with the police also played a key role in early racial memories and how he understands himself as a black man:

A friend of mine, we were in the 11th grade at this point and he got his first car and maybe the second week of having his car, he was pulled over and removed from his car and handcuffed and put in the back of their car just to check his tag, which didn’t seem in place. And that’s when I started to notice we were treated a little differently as far as police go.

Most participants who were natives of Atlanta reported experiencing little anti-black racism from whites growing up, which I discuss in further detail later. However, native Atlanta male interviewees report having some negative interactions with the police and attribute much of those
negative interactions to race. Male participants who were both transplants and natives of metro Atlanta reported interaction with the police as a key indicator of the importance of race in their lives.

Carver is a 46-year-old middle-class doctor and native of Tennessee. Although he lives in a predominately white neighborhood outside of the city and appears to be safe from police misconduct, his class status does not shield him from negative interactions with law enforcement. After asking him about the importance of race in his life, he states:

> It's important more so in terms of survival and how the police officers are killing black men. I've never considered myself a victim or anything, but it seems like it's getting easier and easier for it to be. I do remember one particular time I was here in Atlanta and my cousin was here for some reason and we were on the Marta train. And I don't know what the hell happened, but we got off at the Avondale station and we were walking to our car and all of a sudden police cars surrounded us. Told us to put our hands up. And from what I gathered, something must have happened on the train and some guys that looked like us. So when we got off, they told us to put our hands up. I guess somebody told them we got the guys and they let us go. And that never really dawned on me as a racial thing, but more and more now on social media and TV that these things are happening, and black lives or black men's lives particularly just aren't valued.

Free is a middle-class black male who lives in metro Atlanta. Though originally from Wisconsin, he has been living in Atlanta for over 20 years. However, he recalls a negative experience with law enforcement in the city:

> One particular incident will always stand out in my mind. I have to deal with clients a lot, and I have to get rental cars. This time, I was picking up a client to take them to the Falcons game coming out of Cobb County, going down this street called Neighborhood Parkway. This policeman pulled me over, and he asked for my license. I wasn't speeding and I asked him "What did I do"? He said, "get out of the car". Then walked me to the back of the car and said "What is this"? pointing to the plate. I said it's a Virginia plate. It's a rental car. He said the plates were expired. I told him it was a rental car, how was I to know that? Then he asked for my license again. I went to reach up to get my license. He pulled a gun on me, and made me put my hands on the car, searched me and then searched the car. Then he came back, still with his hand on his gun, and he asked me what did I have in the trunk? At that point, an older black couple was driving by, and I yelled to them to call the police, because there was something wrong with this guy, and
he may shoot me. And they did. He got upset about that and put his hand on my back and pushed me down on the car. He asked me why did I do that? By that time, more police arrived, and they straightened it out, got him under control, told me where to go complain.

Although Wilson (1978) argues that middle-class blacks have benefited from the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, both middle and working-class blacks are victims of police misconduct and discrimination (Feagin 1991). Furthermore, middle-class blacks who have been racially profiled are some of the most vocal people against racial profiling (Schuck, Rosenbaum and Hawkins 2008). Free exemplifies a middle-class black who expresses distrust towards the police. The police did not immediately recognize his class identity and he was physically assaulted by law enforcement. Police officers criminalize black men at a disproportionate rate to white men. The officer displayed this when he assumed that Free had something in his trunk, as opposed to asking him if he had something in his trunk. In addition, the officer acted aggressively when he continued to approach Free with a hand on his gun. This ready-to-kill approach by law enforcement is one of the reasons why many black men and women are victims of police murders. Fortunately, Free was vocal enough to ask for help from bystanders when he felt his life was in danger. This confidence may have come from his class status as Feagin (1991) finds that middle-class blacks utilize their status to combat racism. Had he not reached out for help, Free may not be here to tell his story.

While many of the male participants across categories reported having negative interactions with the police, there was only one male respondent who reported having no negative encounters with law enforcement. Tommy, a 30-year-old, working-class black male who was born and raised in metro Atlanta, stated that he had not had any negative encounters with law enforcement, except for some tension we had with a school security guard on the day of the interview. While living in a low-income neighborhood, he was exposed to drugs and
poverty. These social conditions are often a breeding ground for heavy police activity and police misconduct. However, Tommy reports never having encountered any negative interactions with the police. This was uncommon since many of the male participants, including the middle-class respondents, stated the interactions with law enforcement were key in how they understood themselves as black men, with many of the interactions being negative ones.

4.1.3 Say Her Name: Black Women and Law Enforcement

On March 10, 2016, Baltimore police stopped Korryn Gaines because she had a cardboard sign on the back of her car reading “Any Government official who compromises this pursuit to happiness and right to travel will be held criminally responsible and fined, as this is a natural right or freedom”. With her two children in her car, the police asked her to present her license and registration. After initially refusing to do so, she eventually conceded. The police told her that there was no record of her car having tags. Someone would tow the car and arrest her. Korryn did not agree and resisted the arrest. During the resistance efforts, someone cut her to the point of bleeding. Authorities issued a demand for Korryn to appear in court, but she did not oblige. Five months later, On August 1 at 9:20 am, Baltimore police entered Korryn Gaines’ apartment to serve warrants to her and the man that resided there. After knocking for 10 minutes, no one responded to the door. After entering the apartment, they saw Korryn sitting on the floor with a gun in her hand holding her five-year-old son. She went online to show the world the negative interaction between her and the police. After a standoff, the police felt threatened by Gaines and eventually shot and killed her. The crossfire injured Gaines’ son. Two years later in February 2018, a Baltimore jury awarded 37 million dollars in damages to Gaines’ family. The jury argued that the first shot fired by the police killing Gaines and injuring her son was not reasonable and violated their civil rights.
In context, Korryn Gaines had a reason to distrust the Baltimore Police Department. Just a year earlier, city residents protested the unjust killing of Freddy Gray. Out of this resistance, people sparked flames and turned over police cars because of the unlawful death of Freddie Gray who had his spinal cord broken and eventually died while in police custody. Since then, there has been a tense relationship between black residents and the Baltimore Police Department was tense. Gaines’ story and other narratives of women’s relationship with the police prompted the singer Janelle Monae to write a song entitled “Say Her Name”. This song brought awareness to the women who, alongside black men, were also victims of police misconduct. Although my research shows that negative police interactions are more common in the black male reality, some black women mention experiences with police as a key moment in the way they understand their racialized experiences. Sometimes those experiences may be indirect and exist through the relationship they have with black men in their family or social circle. Rea is a 37-year-old middle class black woman from Michigan. She moved to Atlanta to attend Spelman and eventually took residence here. While associating with black men, she noticed the way police would interact with the black men:

I’ve also experienced when I’ve been with black men. I’ve seen where there have been discrimination with police where you feel differently. I don’t feel like I’ve been treated differently with police, but I have been with men where I felt like I could see them being discriminated against.

Although Rea had not experienced discrimination from police officers, she has been with men and witnessed unfair treatment. Because black women have witnessed these negative situations, interactions with the police terrify them. Christina is a single mother from Michigan, and currently lives in an historic district on Atlanta’s west side. She just moved into a beautiful home and is able to provide a middle-class lifestyle for herself and her son. She is a graduate of Howard University and took doctoral classes at Temple University. Although her class status
allows her certain privileges, she knows that money, resources and networks will not keep her
safe if she is pulled over by a racist cop:

I got pulled over, had to have been 1:00 in the morning. I had just flown in from out of
town. And even though my license plate was tagged, this was here in Atlanta up in East Cobb. I had a license plate, and I had a tag. He pulled me over because I hadn’t paid my ad valorem tax…and he pulled me over. I rolled down all the windows and put my hands
on the steering wheel like this. And sat there and spoke with him, I’m reaching into my
glove box. I’m going to use two fingers. I do not have a weapon. I mean, and I used that
to open up and hand him my papers. Do you want my license? I’m going into my purse.
I do not have a gun. I do not have a weapon. He was like, “ma’am, there’s no reason for
this”. And I said, “yes, sir, there is. You ain’t shooting me dead over some bullshit
traffic violation that was thrown out in court”. I don’t trust him, and I understand the
mistrust. I’m scared for my child. I’m scared for you because it seems like education doesn’t matter. You can come from the best family. It doesn’t
matter.

Monique felt the same way when interacting with Atlanta police:

I got pulled over the other day and thought I was gone pee on myself. I look out my rear
view. It’s a doggone white man. I’m like oh shit. What’s finna happen ok, he gone ask
for my license but it’s in my purse. My purse in the backseat. I’m a have to reach for it.
But if I reach for it he gone shoot me in my face. This all I’m thinking. And the man
didn’t even want all that. He was just letting me know that my taillight was out. He
didn’t ask me for anything, but I’m trembling, holding my steering wheel like please
don’t let me die today.

Although neither Christina nor Monique had a negative encounter with the police, their fear of
the police stems from what they have seen happen to many black males and in some situations,
black women when police question them. At the age of 12, Monique’s son had already had a
racialized encounter with law enforcement:

I had an experience with my 12 -year-old child. I told that lil hardheaded boy, not to
something and I admit and he comes from excellence. Me and his father are not together.
We both work very hard to make sure that boy has everything. He does not come from
brokenness. No his mama and daddy are not together, but he does not come from
brokenness. What made me come alive or wake up. I told my son not to do [something]
and I was stern and we left him unattended. I am here in Atlanta and he’s with his father
and stepmother and they left him unattended. But he’s 12. He can be at home by himself
and do what he supposed to do. My son gets in trouble where it could’ve been some legal
matters. Now my son didn’t do nothing different than what the white boys did who he was
with, but my son got treated like he was just the worst human being over some little petty
graffiti. He didn’t do anything really bad, but no you shouldn’t deface other people’s property. But the police officer that caught him, my baby could’ve been one of the ones shot dead.

Monique realizes that the authority figures were harder on her black son than the white friends who were the accomplices in the incident. This story is an example of how society does not see black boys as children, but rather young men that should know better, while society often views white boys as children that will grow out of their negative behavior. Fortunately, his ending was not as fatal as Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy who police murdered, or many other black boys who have encountered racist law enforcement.

Christina is also afraid for her son and how interactions with the police may affect him as he gets older:

I’m scared for my child. I’ve made him watch Tamir Rice. I’ve made him watch Trayvon Martin. I’ve made him familiar with that. I’ve told him, you need to be vigilant. You need to be aware. And because his father was 6 feet 8 inches tall, my 12-year-old son is already as tall as I am. So they treat him like a man even though he is a sweet little boy who wants to hold my hand and sleep with me on the weekend, right? I think that it’s not a hopeless situation, but I think that there’s a lot that needs to be done to fix it on both sides. We can’t teach our children that all police officers are racist murderers, right? And the police officers can’t believe that every single black person out there is inherently a criminal. But, again, Sandra Bland.

While Christina does not feel that she is teaching her son to be afraid of the police, she reluctantly feels like he needs to be aware that what happened to other boys and women, can happen to him. She wants to equip him with all the tools and strategies needed to help get her son home safely. The feeling that young boys and men have towards police can start before their first encounter with law enforcement. These conversations are part of black culture and necessary when raising black boys. Mothers and fathers reinforce police interaction behavior as defense mechanisms against systemic anti-black racism.
4.1.4 Peaches: Women’s Regional Identity

Another aspect of race that was very specific to gender was the relationship that women had with regional identity. In Zandria Robinson’s (2014) book, *This Aint Chicago: Race, Class and Regional Identity in the Post-Soul South*, she exposes readers to the inner workings of what it means to be black in the New South. In our current day, black people embrace their southern roots. Women embrace their southern belle identity and reimagine it to fit the needs of the newer generation. When asked what it was like being a black man or woman in the south, most of my participants spoke in general terms. However, those respondents who did speak about their gendered experiences within a regional context were mostly women. Angelina is a 28-year-old middle-class woman from Georgia who recently moved to Atlanta and currently works at a local University. For Angelina, her intersection of race, gender and regional identity is not a positive one:

As a woman of the south, you are always reminded you’re a black woman in almost every part of life….The reminders aren’t positive. Reminded that you’re black and what you say is second to what everyone else says. So, for example, in a professional setting, an African-American woman has to ask for something simple over and over again. She didn’t get it until someone of another race came in and said, “Hey this is what she needs”. Everybody else agreed with what she said, but not until the white person said it everything happened. They want it to be heard from their people. Everything has to go through the chain of command and its so defeating….It’s a negative reminder. A constant foot on your neck. So I have to encourage myself in private and say, “hey you got this” ….On social media, which I’m barely on or turn on the television that I barely watch. Always see a black woman looking hypersexual and I’m like why display her that way. Every black woman does not look like that. The people that I know don’t carry themselves like that and a complete false depiction of what it is. A black woman. It’s difficult to see someone doing good on TV. It has to be, it always has to be cosigned by another race. But you see it everywhere. So the general consensus of a black woman is negative, but its not, so it becomes a challenge.

According to Angelina, being a black woman in the South is a constant reminder that white society does not value your work. White allies are important to some black women in the South because it is the only way that some of them can gain access to the resources they want or need.
This need for a white savior reminds them that their words are not powerful enough to evoke change. In the South, society silences black women’s voices and reminds them of their subservient social position, regardless of their class status. These multiple levels of racial and gendered oppression make black cultural spaces even more necessary for the black woman. They are spaces where she can give and receive encouragement as well as revitalize herself and others after battling racism and sexism daily. These racialized and gendered levels of oppression are both explicit and subtle, as black women are often seen as a monolith on TV and movies, and they feel boxed into the hypersexual jezebel description (Collins 2004). There is a need for diverse portrayals of black women in popular culture because they are not a monolith group. Seeing positive images of black women in the media may be a way to help them cope with racialized and gendered levels of oppression that they must encounter in the larger society.

Renee, a 38-year-old middle-class Atlanta transplant from New York reported similar feelings when she described what it was like to be a black woman in the South:

When I feel white people interacting with me now, I feel disdain from them. As a woman, you question your ability to do your job, when the customer treats you a certain way. I didn’t feel that disdain back then. I don’t know if it’s NY, or that the times have changed. When I felt a market increase in the racial interactions, like micro aggressions. The negative racial things I saw. Even now I feel like I have seen some racist shit in Atlanta, more than what I saw in NY, since I haven’t lived in NY, now, as an adult.

This constant reminder of subservience takes a toll on the black woman in the south and can affect the way she looks at herself and the entire white race. Renee is a doctoral student who has achieved academic and professional success. However, her experiences in being a black woman in the South can sometimes erase the confidence needed to have this level of success. Like Angel, southern society reminds her of her subordinate racial and gender status, even though she may be more educated than many of the whites with which she interacts. Renee’s disdain for them did not start until she witnessed the explicit racism of the South. The alone time that black
women need to encourage themselves is also needed to help them regulate their feelings and actions towards whites.

Kennyshia is a 23-year-old graduate student from Warner Robbins, Georgia. Although she is working class based on her income and occupation, she resides with her aunt who is a middle-class woman. Therefore, her education and household income allow her to live a middle-class life. Kennyshia also spoke of how draining and frustrating it can be trying to navigate the south as a black woman:

I have to be aware by now. It’s to the extreme. I feel like I have to work harder and prove more and have this type of presentation that I bring an image that I have to portray and its draining that you have to put on so many masks to be accepted, to have equality of others and even men. And I think that granted some of the traits come easy, but it takes a lot out of you to be black and woman. That adds on more stress. Like you also need to know how to cook and clean and you need to respect your man and dress this way and that way and talk like this and when you go there you need to talk like that. It’s so much like with us as women we have to be aware of and have to walk on our tippy toes to get an entry to a man or to another race or Caucasian or whatever. And it’s like in society its very draining. Being a black woman in the south is draining.

The traditional stereotype that women in the south should exhibit southern hospitality, know how to cook, clean and take care of their significant other is a performance (Robinson 2014) and burden for many black women. Some southern black women reject the white characteristics of southern womanhood, while acknowledging the common pressures black and white women face when battling misogyny and sexism (Robinson 2014). However, the domestic expectations in addition to the sexism and racism in larger society adds an extra load to the problems black women face in the South.

The intersection of race, gender and regional identity not only played out in the workplace, but also in the romantic interactions women had with their significant others. Rea spoke about how moving from Michigan to Atlanta, she was not familiar with the domestic expectations of women when they are in a relationship with a southern man:
I see a lot of differences in the way I was raised and black women in the south from the south were raised. Even in the way of dealing with men and being more domestic. And it didn’t mean they weren’t goal oriented and educated, but personally be more prone to make a plate for a man. I didn’t grow up like that, seeing my mom making plates for my dad. And they’re from the south. But it just wasn’t. So those kinds of things were new for me in terms of this southern hospitality and being a “sweet” woman. I didn’t grow up like that. But in my dating world, I had to pay attention to that. So, if I am interested in a southern man, maybe I need to think about those things.

Because of the racism, sexism and other forms of oppression black women have to endure, it can be difficult to disentangle which form of domination a person should attack first. Terra is a 43-year-old working-class woman from Illinois. She moved to Atlanta to go to school. Upon graduation, she landed a great job and began working for corporate America. Recalling that experience, she states, “The first male boss I had was an asshole. But I didn’t blame my discrimination experience on being black. I think it was a combination of being black, and a woman, and being young and being smart and he just felt intimidated”. Christina had a similar experience on her job:

And I was in charge. And I would go in, and they would listen. It took a while, especially to earn the trust of my team. I couldn’t tell if they didn’t like me because I was black, because I was a woman or because I was new, right?

The intersection of race and gender can be confusing, specifically for black women, because they cannot pinpoint the source of the inequality, thus making it difficult to address the oppressive nature and how to approach it. It’s almost like trying to hit a hidden, moving target. Black women are unsure of where the inequality is coming from—their race, gender, age, or experience. Adding on a southern identity to these already existing intersections can further complicate the resistance efforts initiated by black women.

While women participants spoke on the struggles of being a black woman in the south, there were still some that recognized a more uplifting and positive side to their southern, racial and gender identity. Robinson (2014) reports, “Part of being a natural southern belle is tied to
consuming stereotypical southern food…and having a certain body type, thick or full-bodied (p.
146)”. There was a certain healthy body image and level of strength that existed within southern
women. This strength created a sense of admiration for the southern black woman by men. Della
is a 43-year-old Atlanta transplant from Michigan and had the second highest household income
of all my participants. When speaking about her experiences living in the south, she presents a
funny response:

I would say as a black woman in the south and as an adult, I’ve lived in the South, Midwest, Pacific Northwest. I feel like this has been the best. One, because as a woman, we are judged on our appearance. So, the ideal is more of a healthy normal size woman, whereas I remember I was always skinny and when I finally gained a little bit of weight, people were like “alright now…looking good [laughs]”. And then like literally I moved to the Pacific Northwest and I was like a fatty. And I was a size 4. So, I was like in what universe is size 4 the fat girl. So as a black woman, I loved it. To be surrounded by black men, that love black women. One of the greatest places to be for a black woman.

According to Della, the south is the place where a black woman, particularly a “non-skinny”
black woman, can come and people appreciate her body and her skin. She can gain weight and
people will not ostracize her, but instead praised her for her curves.

Monique is a proud Southerner from Alabama and she describes the struggle of being a
black woman in the south. However, she also speaks about how she feels those same struggles
make southern black women the strongest type of black person:

I feel like black southern women are stronger because our struggle. Black in the south
period is stronger than any other black if you ask me. If it has to be categorized. We
definitely are the stronger ones because we’ve had to deal with a lot of things first hand
than a lot of regions. I mean yeah there were some racism, but it wasn’t as bad as it is in
the South. So, because I am black and a black southern woman, I think it gives me a
higher level of strength because it’s just in me to be stronger. Because it’s just in me.
Because of where my roots came from.

While southern black women are not the only group to face oppression, their struggle is unique,
and people recognized it. The narratives of the southern black woman are a snapshot of African-
American life and provides a foundation for understanding the complex juxtaposition of pain and joy, strength and weakness, and love and fear that exists in not only the southern black woman, but the black community as a whole.

In response to the first research question, how do blacks across social identities (class, gender, region, etc.) understand and negotiate race and racism, it is evident that gender plays a role in how black people understand race and identify with their race. Black women see hair as a way to differentiate them from their non-white peers. It is also a way to separate black girls/women from each other. Although certain kinds of hair are a negative attribute, it can also make black women feel special, proud and unique. While hair is a key racial identifier for women, interactions with the police is usually the first time black men realize that society treats them differently from non-black men. In addition to police interaction, gender plays a role in black mens’ racialized experiences. Many report being the victim of racism in educational settings at a rate higher than women. While there are differences between race and the kinds of racism black men and women experience, black women also see region as playing a role in the way they understand their intersection between race and gender. Although being a woman in the south can be a constant reminder of the multiple oppressions they experience along lines of race and gender, southern identity can also reinforce positive body images, strong racial identity and perseverance that connect to their historically southern roots.

4.2 Three Types of Racism: Explicit, Microaggressions and Internalized Racism

Research shows that throughout history, there has always been tension between various tribes and ethnic groups. Even in Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, identification of Jews as evil laid the foundation for modern-day racism. However, explicit racism as an ideological basis did not come to take shape until the development of the West (Fredrickson
Since then, people of color have had to deal with systemic forms of explicit racism like slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, police brutality and mass incarceration. In the present day, explicit forms of racism can also be expressed through racial slurs (Chew 2010) and even symbols like the swastika sign or the hangman’s noose (Leach and Aten 2010), which I discuss later. Participants in my study report experiencing three types of racism: explicit racism, microaggressions and internalized racism. I explore the first two types of racism in the rest of this chapter and the third type of racism in the subsequent chapter. While there may be differences in the types of racism various blacks experience, there was little variance in the fact that participants across class, region and gender identities reported all three forms.

4.2.1 Explicit Racism

For many black people, racism is something that they experience and recognize, even at a young age. Giselle grew up in a very poor family in north Florida. After going to college, she graduated and now works as a nurse in metro Atlanta. When asked about her early racial memories, she states:

So, me and my family were getting ready to move into this apartment and the guy had given us the key and everything and my mom speaks very well over the phone, so I’m assuming he thought she was a white woman. So, we go look at the place, and it was a white man. And he saw that we were black. And he took the keys back and said, “no its not available” and basically, we were almost about to be homeless because this man basically reneged on a place just because he thought that we were a certain color.

Massey and Denton (1993) write in American Apartheid that this level of overt racism by realtors has had negative effects on the residential patterns of blacks. The gatekeepers between black homebuyers and white neighborhoods often refuse to show available spaces to black interests to ensure that certain neighborhoods remain all/or majority white. This level of residential racism keeps many blacks from integrating white neighborhoods and gaining access to the types of homes and land that will help their house appreciate and ultimately become the
foundation for generational wealth. Unfortunately, the experience that Giselle had is not uncommon. Often, realtors and landlords will refuse to offer housing to blacks, which can lead to concentrated poverty, middle-class blacks being resegregated into poor/working class areas of town, regentrification and in Giselle’s case actual or near homelessness.

Lenny is a 53-year-old male who grew up as what he described “middle-class poor” in Florida. He lived in a single-parent household, but because he resided in a two-bedroom apartment with his mother and sister, his friends considered him rich. After meeting his husband, he moved to various cities before eventually settling in Atlanta. Lenny is a stay-at-home dad and takes care of his and his husband’s two sons. He claims to live a middle-class lifestyle largely because of his husband’s income. When asked about early racial memories, Lenny recalls one of the more horrendous racist stories I heard in all of my interviews.

I remember this distinctively cause it still bothers me today. I remember I had to walk through a predominately white neighborhood. And they would, grown white people, would sick their dogs on us and tell us to get out of their neighborhoods….I was taught as a kid by white people to hate white people…. [later he stated] To me it was on a whole nother level cause if you’re sicking big vicious dogs on kids and saying get out of my neighborhood nigger, then that’s some crazy thing for a kid to experience.

Racist anti-black experiences are not isolated events that are easy to get over. Many of these encounters linger in the minds of victims for years to come and have long lasting effects on their racial outlook.

Jermaine was one of the few participants from Atlanta that mentioned having experienced racial mistreatment while living in Atlanta. However, his first contact with explicit racism did not occur while in Georgia or even in the South. Instead, his first dealing with racism came about when he visited Canada. Jermaine recalls the following account:

Between visiting New York as a sophomore in school, we had magnet programs in high schools in Atlanta and each high school had a focus for college prep kids. My school was finance, so we actually went to Wall Street on a trip and we got to go to Canada across
the border and we experienced some weird things there which was eye opening….People actually moved across the street when we were walking. It kind of came to a head in the store. We almost fought actually the store clerk of this souvenir shop who was cheaper than everyone else around him. So we flocked to this guy [who] refused to take our money from our hands and he would point to the counter and say put the money down….This was in Canada. But the white or Canadian patrons, he exchanged money with them. It had to be cause we were black, I mean what else is there? Cause we’re American? That don’t make any sense.

The South has historically been the space where America has searched for its identity, largely because of its relationship with racial conflict. Racial drama is carried out in the South and racial meaning is born therer (Hale 1998). Because of these elements, some may argue that the most racist accounts would take place in the South. However, my data shows that some of the more explicit racist interactions occurred with participants who lived up North and the Midwest area. Ressy is a bi-racial middle-class black woman, who grew up in New York and Boston, but spent most of her childhood in Orlando. Although she spent most of her thirty-six years on this earth in the South, she recalls the first time she heard the N-word was when she was in New York:

I don’t really remember a lot about New York. I do remember that that was the first time I ever heard the N word, and it was directed at me. The first and maybe only time. Yeah, that was in New York. I remember I was in the after-school program, and yeah, this girl said that.

Christina also recalled explicitly racist accounts in places outside of the South:

Growing up in [city in Wisconsin], we were the only black family in the neighborhood. I got called nigger more times growing up by white girls in the neighborhood who would be my friend half the time, and then the other time would pick up sticks or push me down…. [later she states] The only fight I got in, I was in 7th grade, 8th grade, and I was getting off the bus. “Bye, Jimmy”. “Bye, guys”. And Missy said, “bye, nigger”. I whipped Missy’s ass. I beat Missy’s ass, I beat Missy’s ass and got suspended from school for the next three days. Daddy said, “why would you fight”? I said, “she called me a nigger”. He said, “and you chose to act like one”… I fucked Missy up, right?”
Christina, a 49-year-old woman, recalls when a girl blatantly called her a nigger. After defending herself from such an encounter, her dad punished her. However, her dad appeared to have not addressed the racism initiated by Missy, but the response from the victim.

Recalling early memories of explicit racism was not easy. However, many participants when asked how they cope with racism, responded with some form of “I don’t know”. This response puzzled me because for racism to play such a huge role in the lives of all black people, very few participants had formal organized ways of dealing with it. Responses varied from walking away, suffering in silence, or physical altercations. In other situations, people filed formal complaints, but many times the perpetrator did not receive a punishment. Some participants laughed at these memories, while others cried. The laughter may be a coping mechanism as many participants appeared to be confused about why people could treat others in such an awful way for no reason. Respondents laughed because of how ignorant some whites and white society looked when they perpetuated these racist behaviors. Other coping mechanisms resulted in tears as many of these racist interactions ruined people’s lives, quality of life or could have resulted in the loss of their own life. While black people appeared to use a myriad of ways to cope with racism, very few could describe formal ways on how they address racist interactions when they become a reality or handle it after the encounter is complete. I argue for further research on the way black people, not only cope with racism, but prepare for it prior to the encounter. Racism in the United States is as old as the Constitution itself; therefore, it is not new to the black experience. Scholarship should speak to how black people stay ahead of the racist encounters, and if they don’t, some of the best ways to help blacks prepare for racism and cope with it in a consistent and effective manner.
4.2.2 Microagressions

Explicit racism is hard to deal with and even harder to get over, however, there are other kinds of racism that may not seem as bad, but can be just as hurtful and have long-lasting effects. Chew (2010) explicates this idea stating, “Racism is not always explicit; it can be subtle implicit or inferred” (p. 201). Implicit forms of racism can sometimes be more difficult to observe in a direct form (Chew 2010). Although explicit racism is a common experience among black people across classes (Feagin 1991, Feagin and Sikes 1994), one of the worst kinds of racism is what we typically refer to as microaggressions. Research defines these microaggressions as the “brief everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group (Sue, Bucceri, Lin Nadal and Torrino 2007)”. Many times, whites carry out microaggressive acts towards blacks in an automatic or unconscious manner (Davis 1989). Pierce, in Psychiatric Problems of Black Minorities, argues that these microaggressions by whites stem from their presumed superiority attitude (Davis 1989:515). These interactions force black men and women into a state of double consciousness, having to constantly think about where they are going, what they look like and how society perceives them when interacting with non-blacks.

Della deals with these microaggressions and subtle acts of racism because she often interacts with affluent whites. Because she is black, people often question her place in these circles, and she finds herself having to prove or defend why she deserves to be in the presence of white people. This feeling of constantly having to deal with microaggressions and/or prove one’s worth can drain the energy and enthusiasm of minorities (Crawford-Garrett, Sanchez and Tyson 2017):
I would say when you do move around in white affluent circles you kinda have to prove yourself initially, like that first meeting. You have to show you’re educated or a certain SES and then it’s like okay we can talk to you. Cause one thing about Atlanta is that it’s so highly segregated.

These kinds of interactions are demeaning to black people and is a constant reminder that the dominant society does not value or want them. Having to defend their place is a subtle way of telling them that they have no place in prominent white spaces, unless a white person validates them or they have reached a standard acceptable by white people.

Rea experiences these same microaggressions when she enters high-class white spaces:

I feel like there are places where people don’t think you belong, and it could be a section of town, a store, or an organization where people felt like why are you here? Atlanta is a place where so much can be hidden. Like they don’t wanna say it blatant, but they wanna know who you are. Kinda like, I went to a forty under forty event and this particular one did include some black people, but mostly white. And people were looking like, “So what do you do”? Which is code for “Why are you here”? They don’t talk to other people the same way, like “Hey I’m Joe, how are you”? But to me it’s like, “Hi, so you are…”? So, I’ve experienced that.

Like Della, at times, Rea wears her success and class on her sleeve to show whites why she deserves to be in certain spaces. However, white people never question white males regardless of class, education level, or occupation. In fact, people expect them to inhabit affluent spaces. If you are black in a white space, then that means you must be extraordinary, know someone or be special to sit among affluent white people.

The effects of microaggressions can be devastating. According to Solorzano et al (2000) victims can suffer from self-doubt, frustration and isolation. D.W. Sue (2003) argues that this form of racism can be more problematic and damaging than explicit racist acts (p.48). However, many blacks deal with and tolerate these implicit styles of racism to maintain a certain class status and help their families achieve economic mobility. Terra, a working-class woman, says this about her dad:
Hearing my dad talk at the dinner table. He was in corporate America. And so I knew because he was black and the way he carried himself that he made certain sacrifices at work. Of course, certain things happened to him at work.

She knew that her father carried a lot of burdens and never really talked about them. He endured these burdens so that his daughter could have the opportunity to attend Spelman College and live the middle-class lifestyle that she would experience later in life.

4.2.2.1 Racism in the Workplace

People can carry out racist behaviors in various social settings, my research has shown that large numbers of racist interactions (both explicit racism and microaggressions) occur in the workplace. With residential segregation, educational segregation and blacks typically attending black religious institutions or being around people in their own race, the only time many blacks interact with whites for an extended period is on the job site. It is in these spaces that blacks and other minorities come in contact with racist behavior (Cose 1993; Higgenbotham and Weber 1997). Feagin and Sikes (1996) find that in middle-class workspaces, blacks experience discrimination, pay inequity and other forms of mistreatment. Harvey (2007) finds that black men experience gendered racism in the workplace and often felt ostracized from social groups, silenced and perceived as threatening. In my study, I also noticed how blacks experience racism from white clients or patients. Carver, a physical therapist from Tennessee, recalls the following story:

Now when I’m in a white environment, I’m always very conscious about myself being an African man. Being bald tall and standing out. And when I worked at [a hospital], I had white patients usually older, and their caregivers would see me and make comments like “make sure you take care of my mom or grandmother”. And in my mind, I’m like what does that really mean? Do you see me as someone that wouldn’t take care of her? I’m a physical therapist. I guess I’m a big guy. I’m bald. I don’t have gold teeth. I’m not any of the other stuff, but they would make comments like that, so it always made me think, what does that really mean? Why would I not take care of her? That’s my job. So those microaggressions, I see.
Although Carver is a physical therapist, white patients still feel they have to remind him to do his job. However, if he were a white doctor, many patients would feel comfortable knowing that the white doctor was already competent enough to do his/her job and would not feel the need to remind him of that. Carver mentions twice that he is a big black guy. He knows that he stands out, and society perceives black men who are large in stature as threatening. Harvey finds this in her research. Black men who are large in stature and in the presence of whites may have to appear extra nice, docile, and weak to protect whites from the fear they have about big black men. Black men do this to prove to whites that they are not out to hurt them. These kinds of racist microaggressions in the workplace make it difficult for black people when they are on their job. They are either devalued, disregarded, or must prove to people that they are in a position of authority and are trustworthy. Alma is a nurse from Mississippi and she also experienced racism from whites in a similar form:

As a nurse I’ve gone into my patients’ room as an RN and the CNA would be under me and I’ve gone into the room of a white patient and tell them who I am and say I’m Alicia, I’m your nurse today. (patient says) “Well, will you get my nurse”. (Alicia replies) “Well I am your nurse today”. (patient says) Oh you’re my nurse? And its happened quite a lot and I find myself explaining who I am. And even though I’ve given you your medicine, I come in and you still want me to send the nurse in. Or we’ve had a white nurse assistant and they want me to send her in to give the medicine and do all these other things. Nope that would be me. So sometimes I think there’s an assumption that we’re not or beneath. I do feel like that.

Teachers and counselors tell black children to go to school, graduate, and get a good job. Still after all that work, society views black people as less competent than the whites that work under them. The constant devaluing of black effort and work is a challenge in the workplace and is a burden that many whites, specifically white males, do not have to deal with.
Previously, Giselle stated that racism in housing almost led to her family being homeless.

Later, when asked about early racial memories, she talked about problems in the workplace.

Giselle, a nurse, recalls:

Well actually recently in Atlanta I worked at this hospital that was 95 percent white in an area that is known to be racist, but I was trying to think that maybe if I worked there it would be a different standard. So, I worked in the office and I was the only chocolate drop in the office of course and the entire office hated Barack Obama. One young lady said Michelle Obama was a transvestite and she couldn’t give me one legitimate reason as to why she didn’t like her. And they even said racism was an excuse….She hated me because I had a bachelor’s degree in nursing and she said I thought that I was all that. She locked me out of the office a few times and almost knocked me over a few times. I have a prosthetic [leg]…. So when she almost knocked me over we had to have a sit down. Three separate meetings about this one young lady. And after this meeting, she kinda settled down but the thing that got it, one day was she had a confederate flag on her desk and no one did anything about it. She was not reprimanded. And you know what they did to me was, I was on a contract bid and what they did, they kept saying we’re going to resign your contract and they waited two days before my contract was supposed to be renewed and said, “I’m sorry we don’t have enough funds to keep it going”. No one was reprimanded about that. Like if I didn’t have my finances in order, me and my children wouldn’t have been able to eat…They would just do little ugly things to me cause I was the only one and I try to never be the stereotype of the angry black woman, but sometimes yall bring that angry black woman on out.

Giselle’s experience has both race and class implications. If she had not saved her money, then her class status may have dropped, and her family would have suffered as a result. The continued pressure of racism is a stressor to many black people. While many blacks are unbothered with the fact that someone may not like them, the pressures of racism come when this hatred and discrimination carried out by whites begin to negatively affect life outcomes (where blacks can buy homes, where they can work, if they can get a job, how long they can work at a job, etc). The hatred many whites feel towards blacks can inhibit them from having access to the things they need to support themselves and their families. Black people must be on guard and financially prepare themselves (and at times even put money aside) just in case racism rears its ugly head.
In addition to the class implications, Giselle states that she does not want to be seen as the angry black woman, even though she has been physically and emotionally abused by her white coworkers. The internalizing of popular false frames like “the angry black woman” causes black people to suppress the righteous indignation that they have because of racism, and in many cases other black people may feel that frustration in the form of internalized racism. I discuss this later in the chapter that is specific to internalized racism.

Racism in the workplace does not solely affect middle-class blacks. Alexuce, a working-class woman who grew up in Atlanta, talks about the way racism in the workplace adds a certain amount of stress to her daily life. She claims:

Alicia: “And my job is predominately white. It’s like three of us black people there. It’s like three out of fourteen there black. And my work experience and race relations at my job isn’t too good. They’re older white people and kinda stuck in their ways. And they are used to certain things that I would find offensive. They don’t think so and it’s like the awkward times. Like the office now they talk about politics when they probably shouldn’t. And I married a Muslim, and they have negative things to say about that. So, it’s an awkward place to be and work.

Interviewer: Does this add stress to you?

Alicia: Yeah it definitely adds stress and anger and annoyance.

Alexuce finds herself having to deal with racism and Islamaphobia, which is a direct attack on her husband. The negative responses by white employees anger her, but at times she may have to hold it in or try to ignore it for the sake of her job. This experience is an added stressor in her life and the lives of many black people.

4.2.2.2 Racism in the classroom

In addition to the workplace, the classroom is also a common site for anti-black racism. Black boys are often the victims of racism in classrooms. Teachers and/guidance counselors are often the culprits of these racist interactions. Research suggests that people assume black men in
college have received an opportunity to attend college based on their athletic ability. Instructors do not assume that they are intellectually capable of achieving academic success. Ongoing negative interactions can often lead to self-doubt in the minds of these students (Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso 2000). When asked about the first time he experienced racism, Carver speaks to many of these same experiences:

Probably the first thing to stick out to me. When I was in undergrad and wanted to be a physical therapist and was thinking about applying to physical therapy school and at the time my grades weren’t that great, but it was something I was interested in. So, I went to talk to the person who was going to be the founding chair of the department. White guy and actually from [a university] and I talked a lot to him and handed him my transcript and told him I was interested in the program and things I need to do. And he essentially told me that I should change my major and that my grades weren’t good and this wasn’t the program for me. At that time, I took that personally and maybe it wasn’t that what he said wasn’t true but I guess his delivery and I guess he really thought that maybe cause my grades weren’t good or that I was a black guy who didn’t know anything about physical therapy or wasn’t interested in it. Whatever his reasons were, I took that as a racial implication and took it more at heart personally. And I went to a predominately white college. That was first real salient thing that sticks out. That was my first time being in [that] environment cause high school was predominately African American.

In addition to the assumption that a black male could not do the work in graduate school, it is also not uncommon for teachers and counselors to advise black male students to choose lower level careers, enter lower level colleges, or choose majors that may be “easy” as opposed to the ones they may desire. Guidance counselors (Lee and Ekstrom 1987), teachers and professors can sometimes act as the gatekeepers between students and their path to success (Teranishi and Briscoe 2008). Unfortunately, racism can cause some of them to influence students to veer off the path that could lead them to their goals. Instead, some students internalize these racist ideas that their current grades, or lack of motivation is indicative of their future ability to reach their goal, and therefore, people encourage them to lower their standards (Welton and Martinez 2014:210) and embark on a career that is more “for them”. On the contrary, authority figures encourage many whites students to continue their path to success regardless of their current
academic standing. This is largely due to the belief that white kids who go through a rebellious stage are “just being children” and will eventually grow out of this young phase of academic apathy (Kendrick Moore Thomas and Matlock 2009 p. 588). However, society does not offer black children that same level of humanity and leeway. People see young black boys as exhibiting their full capabilities at a young age and they are not given the ability to grow out of their rebellious stage. Instead, authority figures automatically see them as incapable and they encouraged black boys to limit the possibilities they may see in themselves. Fortunately, Carver did not allow this professor to negatively affect his drive and he later became a physical therapist. While his story may have turned out positively, this interaction reminded him that his race would be a factor in how hard he would have to work to achieve his goal.

Unfortunately, everyone’s story does not end as well as Carver’s story. Rachel is a middle-class black woman who went to a good high school. Her family is from the continent of Africa and she grew up in Atlanta. Eventually she graduated from law school and obtained a PhD. She also spoke about how negative encounters with counselors affected black males that she knew:

Participant: He [her husband] has told me a story about how his brother – his brother went to 9a school in metro Atlanta], and he had – what was it? A counselor? Tell him basically you don’t need to go to college. You pretty much ain’t gonna be nothing.
Another Male: He told him he wasn’t college material.
Participant: Yeah. He told him he wasn’t college material.
Interviewer: Wow.
Participant: So he was like, from that point on his brother was like, oh okay, and just accepted it and just whatever.
Interviewer: Right.
Participant: I think when you have people – first of all, that person didn’t need to be no teacher or counselor or whatever it was.
Another Male: Exactly. They shouldn’t have been in the system anyway.
Participant: Beyond that, when you have those kinds of things being told to you, even then that’s a teenager, but you’re having someone tell you that you don’t need to do that. You need to go ahead and go on to the work force, or you need to go ahead and do this or
whatever. Then I think that it kind of limits where you feel like you can be. Whereas, I’m over here in (high school), and they’re like everyone can go to college. Yay.

Another Male: Constantly getting that affirmation. Yes.

Participant: Yes. Then it’s like over here it’s like, yeah you don’t need to. You’re not ready. Yeah, it’s not for you. It’s not for you. It’s not for you, and it ain’t for you either. You know, it’s kind of like I think that it affects what you feel like you can be and how successful you become.

Unlike Carver, Rachel’s brother-in-law internalized the negative perception that this school representative had about him, which left him feeling inadequate and incapable of going to college.

Lenny also experienced negative treatment from teachers while in school. His reality influenced the type of school that he felt comfortable sending his child:

Although I went to an all-black high school, they didn’t talk about that [black people] in my history class. And one day I was in class and I just burst out and said, “There’s no black people in these books”. I got pissed off. And the teacher made me leave the class cause I said everything we talk about is white people. Where is the black history?

Although Lenny should have probably chosen a better way to address the lack of diversity in his history class, his overall concern was valid. However, when he decided to speak up for himself and address the racism in his class, the teacher punished him. Lenny was chased by dogs and had rocks thrown at him by whites because he walked through their neighborhood in order to get to school. After enduring that level of tragedy and trauma, he finally gets to school, and his teacher punishes him for addressing racism in his class and having the desire to learn more about his own history and culture. Unfortunately, these and other racist scenarios are common among black boys. What kind of message does this send? It tells them that after overcoming barriers to attend school, their voice, desires and race is not important or valued. Speaking out on issues that are important to them can lead to retribution, and they must leave their feelings and ideas at the door. This perpetual negative messaging makes school a hostile environment and often causes black boys to perform poorly, drop out or flunk out.
Lenny’s experience shaped the kind of schools he wanted his sons to attend. When I asked him what kind of school he preferred sending his children to, he stated he preferred sending them to a middle-class black school over a middle-class white school. When I asked him why he made that choice, he stated, “because I’ve experienced racism and don’t want them to experience that in the middle-class white school. I don’t want to push them in that”. Unfortunately, Lenny was not able to shield his boys from experiencing racism in their school, and they too became victims of racism by non-black adults:

I’ve met a lot of interesting white people and actually our boys had a book fair at the school. When they sent out the message about the book fair, they sent a message about some people stealing the books. I noticed when I went to the book fair with my two boys, the list that they had we were looking for the books. And when I walked in, there was a white woman standing by the register along with an Asian woman. The white woman came over and I was like “Why is she following me”? So, I figured she was asking me if I need help, but she never did. Then when I looked up, she would be staring, then turn her head like I’m a steal something. I think [it was] the complexion of my skin.

Although Lenny has traveled a distance both physically and emotionally to get far away from those rocks being thrown at him on his way to school, racism against black boys in schools is hegemonic and seems to follow him like it follows other black boys and men. He tried but unfortunately, his socioeconomic mobility from being poor in Florida to middle class in Atlanta could not protect his sons from the racism that black boys experience by schools and school personnel.

While black boys and men were usually the victims in terms of racism in the classroom, data shows that this level of oppression does not just affect black boys, but black girls as well (Evans-Winters and Esposito 2010, Blake, Butler, Lewis and Darenbourg 2010). Angelina remembers when school personnel mistreated her in school, and how that dictated which racial group would have a clearer and easier path to success:
In elementary school…we had a television broadcast at the school. And they only had white kids to anchor. They would have one black child to be a part of the announcement. They would do the pledge of allegiance, and then you would have the school song and it was always an exciting thing to see and I saw it then. I wanted to be involved. I asked my teachers. I didn’t wanna stay put and I wanted to be involved in that arena. And she was like, “no” and it was not encouraged. I was discouraged to do what I wanted to do, but when my white students it was there platform and they were able, and I told my dad I want to do this cause this will allow me to grow. It allowed them [the white students] to grow in other areas. And it was a platform for them to do other things in schools. Those same students were like the chosen and everyone else sat and watched them and you can ask to be apart, but they didn’t want you to apart. I realized that then. I get kinda emotional when I say this.

Roughly 20 years later, Angelina still gets emotional after recalling how racism stifled her excitement and interest in academics. It was clear to her that black children were only tokens and teachers alienated them from the unique and special places in school. In fact, teachers discouraged her from being involved in the extracurricular activities that could have made her even more excited about school. These situations have long-lasting effects because, as Angelina stated, the students that were pushed to be involved were also given leadership positions and people saw them as the standard. Not only does this send a message to black children that they are not good enough to be in positions of power and influence, but it also tells white students that people who look like them are the only ones that are capable of being leaders in your society. Teachers encouraging white students and discouraging black children can result in future educational opportunities and possible connections and networks.

4.3 Conclusion

The data in this section shows that race and racism is still an important factor in the daily lives of black people in the United States. However, scant research explicitly addresses the way racial identity and racism is gendered in the black experience. Black girls may interact with non-black people in school and on the playground. However, they did not see themselves as being any different than their associates until they compared hair and experiences surrounding their
hair. This bodily characteristic is usually the first racial identifier for a black woman. Contrarily for black men, contact with the police is typically the first time they are introduced to the importance of race or their racial difference. Interactions with law enforcement is often a key step in a black man knowing his race, racial identity and the difference between him and the rest of the world.

Another way gender influences race is through regional identity. While location does not appear to be significant to the black man’s experience in the South, black women see living in the south as empowering, as well as challenging. Society reminds black women that they inhabit a social status that is not as high as their white counterparts, and that can be stressful to them. They must obtain white allies to speak to other whites for them as a strategy for securing the resources needed to do their jobs. Although being a black woman in the south can be taxing, it is also a reminder of how strong and resilient the black woman is. The love that they feel from black men in the South reinforces the confidence needed to navigate the larger society, which can be both sexist and racist.

Although racism and racist experiences differ between class and gender, many of the racialized interactions fit into one of three categories: explicit racism, microaggressions, and internalized racism. Racist experiences existed in the workplace, as both men and women dealt with inequality on their job. The second location where racism seemed to be prevalent was in the classroom. Teachers, counselors and authority figures often view black boys and men as disruptive, incompetent and unworthy.

In the next chapter, I discuss the third category internalized racism. Blacks across class and gender categories felt good about being black and being part of the black community. However, most of the participants also spoke on some of the challenges that exist in the black
community. Because racism is so hegemonic in the life of blacks in the United States, many of them have internalized racist and stereotypical ideas about their racial group and can reinforce it in their intraracial interaction. I assess various aspects of internalized racism among blacks and introduce new themes that scholars can discuss when analyzing racial interaction.
5. **INTERNALIZED RACISM**

“People say black people hold each other back like crabs in a barrel, conveniently neglecting the crab’s natural habitat is not a barrel. Who Built The Barrel?” –Unknown-

When discussing race-based inequality, scholars typically utilize systemic or colorblind racial theories to explain the way people reinforce racism in the larger society as well as in interpersonal behavior (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2006). The majority/minority dynamic or the relationship between a person of color and the dominant race is the general context in which scholars discuss race and racism. However, few scholars take note of the way U.S. American culture, systems and powers embed racist ideologies and behaviors into the minds and actions of minorities and it is reinforced through interpersonal interactions with other people of color (Bivens 1995; Jones 2000; Pyke 2010; Speight 2007). Negative feelings or betrayal towards one’s own racial group has been commonly known as “self-hatred “(Grantham and Ford 2003; Jones Cross and Defour 2007). However, scholars prefer to use the term internalized racism to describe these interactions, arguing that “racial self-hatred” is a “narrower and more politically volatile term” (Pyke 2010). The term *internalized racism* is more appropriate because it explains the way racism has structurally and historically, forced people of color to separate themselves from members of their own group. It examines the racist ideas initiated by a dominant white population and hegemonically forced into the cultural norms, behaviors and institutions of U.S. American society. Blacks were socially conditioned to adopt these norms, beliefs and behaviors that shaped every aspect of their social life, and thus reinforced many of those same indoctrinations. In addition, certain segments of the minority group have been given privileges and benefits that have been over other members, which has caused division and internal friction within the racial group. Roots of internalized racism exist in the historical and hegemonic nature of anti-black racism in the U.S. It is important that scholars analyze it as an extended form of
systemic racism, or in Speight (2008) words “one more piece of the puzzle”. One characteristic of internalized racism is blacks who accept negative messages about people within their own race. They lack confidence in the abilities and worth of their own people and accept that there are limitations to the goals that their racial group can achieve (Jones 2000: 1213). Limiting a person or people’s full humanity (goals, self-determination, and allowance of self-expression), embracing whiteness, self-devaluation, rejection of ancestral culture, and some actions of helplessness and hopelessness can be the manifestation of internalized racism (Jones 2000).

Internalized racism not only affects a person’s cultural outlook and psychological well-being, but also a person’s mental and physical health. Research shows that African-Caribbean women with high levels of internalized racism are at an increased risk of obesity and glucose intolerance (Tull, Tyng-Sheu, Butler and Cornelious 2005). Internalized racism may contribute to depression, substance abuse and mental health problems (Williams 1999). In addition to health, there are connections between higher levels of internalized racism and lower levels of marital satisfaction in both husbands and wives (Taylor 1990).

Exploring internalized racism devoid of its structural and historical roots causes scholarship to place racial liability on the victims of oppression. Therefore, we reinforce racism by blaming the victims of oppression without going a step further to analyze America’s racist past. Our country’s racist foundation forces these racist ideologies on the culture, thoughts, systems and actions of white and non-white communities. If people of color are not careful, they can subconsciously perpetuate these same racist ideas among their own group. At times, minority groups propagate these ideas without the presence of whites, which makes internalized racism even more unique. When nonwhites reinforce racist ideas and stereotypes in an all-minority environment, then victims and perpetrators of internalized racism began to look at each
other as the enemies while the creators of racism appear nonexistent. It appears that the oppression lingers in the hands of other minorities. Internalized racism can then become more harmful than other forms of racism because, unlike other aspects of racial inequality, whites can benefit from racism without blame. With systemic and colorblind racism being present in white/white and white/non-white interactions, internalized racism is present in non-white/non-white interactions, which leaves no place left in human relationships where people of color can be safe from the hegemony of racism.

In this section, I explore the positive and negative feelings that people of color, specifically black people, have about members of their own race. In addition, I assess these feelings and ideas within older conceptual frameworks like colorism and employ other frames like defensive othering and Bivens’ (1995) four frames of internalized racism. Later, I discuss why Atlanta as a testing site for race and class makes it necessary to create new ways of understanding the way blacks can reinforce white racist ideas and division in their own group.

5.1 I love black people

Social science studies show that, shortly after the Civil Rights and black power movements, the black middle class felt a sense of group cohesion with the black poor and maintained a sense of solidarity with the race as a whole. Scholars also found that generally middle-class blacks did not separate themselves from working-class blacks (Sampson and Milam 1975). Myers and Magavio (1983) suggests that in the 1960s and 70s, the black middle class’ racial group identification increased in the past decade. Hwan Fitzpatrick and Helms (1998) argues that the black middle class is neither lower nor more ethnocentric than the “lower” class. Moreover, the post-Civil Rights middle class was more in-group oriented than pre-Civil Rights middle-class blacks. While the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements did a lot to change
policy and identity politics related to people of African descent, it also helped many blacks feel
closer to each other. My research revealed similar sentiments of group identity.

I asked participants how they felt about black people and most of them suggested that
they love or had some level of affinity for black people. All the participants did enjoy some
parts about being black. Shine is a 23-year-old working-class mother who is finishing her
undergraduate degree. She was born in an island in the Caribbean and currently lives outside of
Atlanta. When asked how she felt about black people, she stated:

I love black people [very excited]. We are the most amazing and strong people. Like we
are amazing and can do stuff other people can’t. We are very intelligent and have so
much going for ourselves…that’s how I became a teacher, cause I felt like I need to reach
my black students cause I was like y’all can do better, like come on y’all are
awesome….so we are amazing.

Lenny has a very different social identity from Shine. Although they are both parents, he is a 53-
year-old man living a middle-class lifestyle in the city of Atlanta. However, he also has similar
feelings about black people:

Beautiful people. I like black men and women and I’m like, man we are beautiful people.
Intelligent, kind, and very forgiving. Because to have gone through what we have gone
through and have people still afraid of you, we’re very forgiving people.

Most respondents across class identities and age cohorts claimed that they loved black people
because of their resiliency and ability to overcome traumatic situations. Therefore, black
people’s affinity towards each other is related to struggle. The capacity to endure oppression is a
major part of the black experience in the United States, and the way black people identify with
each other and themselves.

5.2 I love my people BUT…

While a large percentage of the participants had positive things to say about black
people, many of those same respondents usually qualified their positive responses with negative
critiques about being black. In fact, less than four of the respondents claimed to have an affinity
for black people or the community without offering negative feedback. Anatha was born in Wisconsin and moved to Atlanta in her 20s. She went to college for a few years and is self-employed. She is middle class because her son is a famous rapper and she helps to manage his career. Together, they bring enough money to make her the participant that had the highest annual household income of all participants in my study. She is surrounded by black people in the hip hop industry and has mixed feelings about them:

Like I said, I love my people but I do feel indifferent….I wish we’d just get it together. I wish we’d get it together before we start pointing fingers at other people and what we don’t have. You know? A lot of stuff we don’t have is because we don’t aspire to get it. Sometimes, a lot of times, it is the system making it a lot more difficult for us but…we need to do better as a people.

Anatha loves people in the black community, and has little problem with people fighting for their rights and demanding equality. However, she has an issue with the timing in which these demands take place. Some of my participants and the black people in the larger community claim that people of African descent must meet a certain moral standard before they demand equality or speak out against the wrongs in our society. These moral standards may include less violence in black communities, unity among black people, and economic support from the more advantaged groups. According to Anatha, the demands for equality are out of sequence and should come after black people have “gotten it together” and “done better”. One way the black community can “get it together” is by having greater aspirations for what we want. Therefore, when the aspirations in the black community increase, then that will be a step in the right direction, and put black people in the place where they can begin addressing the systemic issues in our society.
Mari Carver is a working-class 73-year-old woman who was born and raised in Atlanta. She grew up during the height of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Therefore, she had a very interesting story and expressed a deep love for black people:

I love my people. I don’t care. I don’t care how we act. I just want the young people to do better and have higher standards and higher goals. I love black people and being black. Not to say I don’t like white people, but I love my people foremost. I just wish they would act better and do a little better.

Mari also speaks positively about the black community and is not as critical as Anatha about the behavior of some people in the community. She expresses her love for the race, regardless of some peoples’ behaviors. However, she qualifies her affinity by addressing a specific group in the black community—the young people. Some participants, like Anatha, had issues with the behaviors of black people as a whole, while other participants typically had issues with a subgroup of the population that was different from them. Mari like some other participants, felt that they had to apologize for loving black people by also expressing their love for white people. This qualifier is a way of letting society know that they are not practicing what people claim is “reverse racism”. Black people don’t whites to accuse them of this practice, so many of the respondents claimed to love black people, and then also claimed to like white people immediately after as a way of validating their appreciation for their own race.

Lisa is a 43-year-old transplant from north Florida who lives a middle-class lifestyle with her husband and two daughters. She grew up poor and working class and spent a lot of time around black folks. While she loves her people, she also qualifies her affinity towards them:

I love my people, but sometimes it can be embarrassing. The way we act. The way we carry ourselves. And to me, every race has ghetto. Not just ours. But we don’t have to carry ourselves the way we do like in the black community. We basically killing ourselves and it’s sad when I’m looking for somewhere to stay. I don’t want to stay in an all-black community.
Lisa and Anatha have similar feelings towards the black community. While they claim to love black people, they also express disdain for some behaviors they see in the community. Some of these actions include in-group violence. She qualifies the statement by asserting that all races have "ghetto" people or exhibit “ghetto” actions. She uses “ghetto” to mean that all races have people in the group they may act ignorant or display behaviors that may be embarrassing to the entire group. Lisa does not want people to think that blacks are the only people who act outside of the moral character of their racial group. However, the actions of a few people are important enough to dictate her residential preferences. While she likes her people, she prefers not to live in a community with only blacks. The perceptions that black people have about each other are significant to the choices that they make, which in turn have larger social effects, such as the economic base of a community, quality of leaders in a neighborhood, and number of active, registered voters in an area. If all of the middle-class, educated, socially active, non-felonious blacks out migrate a certain community, then that area can become subject to a loss of political, social and economic power. This is why perception and identity is important to analyze and rectify when dealing with issues related to larger, structural change.

Zen is a 23-year-old working-class Atlanta native and a recent graduate from a college in Atlanta. This is how he feels about black people:

I’m fine with them [black people] as a whole. We could do better with our presentation and like media and all that. Don’t know why it’s so popular to sag, but it looks sloppy and doesn’t look put together.

Across gender, class identities and age cohorts, most respondents mentioned some negative aspect about black people or culture that was either embarrassing, or made them want to separate themselves from the black community. If a participant addressed a negative attribute about the community, it was a characteristic rarely assigned to the group that they represented. For
example, non-black Americans would criticize black Americans, or in the case of Mari, the older generation would criticize the younger generation. Generally, middle-class people would criticize working-class folks, but they also had issues with other middle-class black people as well. This was the main subgroup that had major issues with people inside and outside their subgroup. Many times, respondents expressed shame in racial subgroups with which they did not identify. For example, Mari Carver was an older woman, but her negative critiques about black people were strongly related to younger people. Lisa was a middle-class woman, but she had strong critiques about actions that are typically concentrated among working class and poor black people. Zen, an educated male, viewed negatively the “sagging” style of dress that is usually connected to the hyper masculine, “thug-like,” black males. These constant qualifying factors that made my participants “love black people…but” became the foundation for me assessing internalized racism among black people.

5.3 Bivens’ IR Frames

Internalized racism is a form of systemic oppression that teaches African Americans to fear their own power and difference (Bivens 1995). The way minorities, specifically black people, practice internalized racism and other forms of intraracial division can be examined through Bivens’ frameworks: Standards, Naming the Problem, Resources and Decision Making. I define and discuss these frameworks in greater detail in subsequent sections of the chapter. I also examine defensive othering as a mechanism that reinforces in-group separation. Defensive othering is another approach that occurs within many of these frameworks when people of color practice identity work by seeking acceptance into the dominant culture or distancing themselves from the stigmas related to their racial group (Pyke and Dang 2003). All these frames and theoretical concepts help explain the way participants practice intraracial division and internalized oppression among black communities.
5.3.1 Standards

Bivens (1995) describes her Standards frame as “the standards for what is appropriate or normal that people of color accept white people’s or Eurocentric standards...(grabbing) onto standards set in reaction to the abuse of systemic racism”. One of the more popular and oldest ways people employ Standards in black society is through colorism. Colorism is deeply rooted in anti-black racism, systemic racism, and slavery.

5.3.1.1 Redbone: Colorism in the black community

During slavery, so-called slave masters would often favor light-skinned over darker-skinned blacks. Whites permitted lighter-skinned blacks to work in the house, eat the same food as the whites, and oversee the activities of the darker-skinned field negroes. Prior to the Civil War, colorism played a major role in a black person’s ability to achieve middle-class status as mulattoes (mixed-race people) made up a large portion of the free black community. The children of an enslaved African woman and a white farmer brought with it certain social benefits. In his book, *The Black Middle Class*, Bart Landry (1987) outlines the history of this unique group of people. He finds that outside of the likelihood that a mixed-race black child would be set free from slavery, mulatto blacks were likely to learn a trade, or receive formal education (Landry 1987). After the Civil War, white missionaries began migrating to the south and opening schools for black children across the region (Frazier 1957). Missionaries taught these privileged mixed-race African Americans using a European style of education. Whites indoctrinated them with themes of piety, thrifty, gentleman like respectability and they perpetuated these ideals within their own communities. Booker T. Washington and others were among the early black leaders that continued the pious, respectable tradition (Frazier 1957). The black middle class is a unique mixture of the “gentleman” qualities of the white missionaries that educated them and the peasant folk culture from which their racial identity lies (Frazier 1957).
After the Civil War, many of these mixed-race blacks were able to maintain jobs as skilled artisans or entrepreneurs catering to white clientele. These opportunities resulted in steady income, white allies and social status. Advantage largely linked to their mixed race allowed them to create a distinct status group during the Reconstruction years. This group set themselves apart from the masses of black people and created their own community and society that they patterned after their white counterparts. In some cases, the elite blacks would exclude other African Americans by creating their own high-status congregations like St Matthews Episcopal in Detroit (Landry 1987). African Americans still placed emphasis on color, as many of the mulattoes of this status group would discourage relations with darker skinned blacks, regardless of their position. Bart Landry (1987) refers to the mulatto elite as a status group rather than class category, because eligibility had little to do with objective characteristics like income or occupation, which largely describes class. Instead, a status group was determined subjectively and based on characteristics from career to family name (Landry 1987). Although, historians do not refer to this group as an economic class, the mulatto elite provided the foundation for what would be the black middle class.

During the 1960s and 70s, darker-skinned blacks began to empower themselves through positive imagery and words, seeing themselves as beautiful, and in some instances more “black” than lighter-skinned blacks. Due to the rise of counternarratives and the black power and black is beautiful movements (Chou 2008), researchers found that more black students in elementary school reported having a more positive racial self-image (Porter and Washington 1979:56). This “better” treatment by society towards lighter-skinned blacks and the response by other members of the black community has been the source of a long-standing division between lighter and darker-skinned blacks. Even in the present day, this discord is still widespread in the black
community. Famous black celebrities have recently come under scrutiny for criticizing black or darker-skinned women. Comedian Kevin Hart took to Twitter and wrote, “Light-skinned women usually have better credit than dark-skinned women...broke ass dark hoes LOL”. He later stated that his comments were just jokes and alluded to the idea that he could not hate dark-skinned black women because he has a dark-skinned daughter. Rapper Kodak Black was interviewed by Essence, a magazine that targets the black woman demographic, and he made the following statement, “I love all my fans. It’s some beautiful Black women out there. It’s just not my preference to deal with a dark-skinned woman. I’m already dark. I like light-skinned women”. These are recent and popular examples of the way colorism is perpetuated in modern-day society.

My research shows that while black people across class groups and regions experience colorism, this type of division seemed to be specifically prevalent in the narratives of Atlanta natives. Historically, Atlanta has been a unique place that seems to shield blacks from the outside anti-white racism that are common in other parts of the country (which I discuss further in the Atlanta chapter). However, Atlanta natives and residents are still victims of the colorism that has its foundations in anti-white systemic racism. Kelsey, a 43-year-old middle-class Atlanta native, recalls horrible experiences with downward mobility and colorism growing up in metro Atlanta:

So we went from a [middle-class] family neighborhood with brick houses and all this stuff, to like Candler Road. That’s a big adjustment for us growing up and having to fight and defend ourselves. And then dealing with some of the things in childhood around colorism, which we had not experienced before. And having to fight all the time because you were considered fairer skinned, and your hair was longer and things like that. So that was a quite painful lesson.

When Kelsey was living in her middle-class black neighborhood in Atlanta, she did not recall experiencing colorism among her peers. However, her parent’s divorced and which forced her
mom to live in a more working-class metro Atlanta neighborhood. This move put her in a position where she would have to fight other kids because of her complexion. While Kelsey is not suggesting that only disadvantaged perpetuate colorism, it is important to note that colorism is linked to internalized racism because it continues the idea that the closer a person is to “white” the better they are. Defensive othering is evident in colorism and the Standards IR frame because some lighter-skinned blacks use their complexion to distance themselves from the darker-skinned blacks, in hopes of being more accepted by white society. Blacks in the early twentieth century employed this strategy known as “passing” (Khanna and Johnson 2010).

In response to this defensive othering, less light-skinned blacks would bully, oppress and cause harm to lighter-skinned blacks because of their acceptance by whites. This marginalization goes so far as to not include light-skinned blacks as part of the black community. According to Hunter (2007), it implies that they do not identify with their fellow blacks, care about them, or wish that their skin was white.

Poor blacks are not the only ones to experience colorism. Jermaine grew up around middle-class blacks in Atlanta, and he also recognized the light/dark divide in the black community and how the people he so dearly loved marginalized him:

The first thing was realizing that as an African-American male with fair skin and straight hair, I was obviously different from the beginning [lol]. From all of my classmates, that was made obvious pretty young. Rough like you’re obviously not, what are you? So but that’s within the race….its interesting as more of an half and half cause it’s a privilege and a drawback. As I’ve gotten older, I understand that I’m allowed to be certain things and do certain things because I looked a certain way. And I kinda put together the idea that at some point, fair skin was better than dark skin and fair skin was closer to whiteness, therefore more advantages. And think to even now that’s played out. I’ve seen it in my life. I’ve tried to rationalize it myself but facts are facts. There’s no other experience like that to me knowing that just because I look a certain way, I had a leg up on my brothers and a number of things. And the drawback to that is the backlash from my own people who don’t. I can’t explain it cause I’m not them. But I’m viewed as different and left out of certain things and excluded from certain things cause my
blackness is in question or my real nigga status is not that of everybody else. So it’s like fifty, fifty. I got a leg up, but then I’m kicked back down because. It’s the same thing.

Jermaine’s experience is fascinating. While Kelsey had to fight because she was light skin, Jermaine received certain privileges due to his color. However, these privileges came at a consequence. He enjoyed being black and living in his black community, but did not always feel fully accepted by his own. This perpetual feeling of being lifted by society (both white and black) yet being pulled down by the black community that he admires, always leaves him at ground zero in terms of developing his racial pride and identity. Kelsey and Jermaine are in their 30s and 40s, so one could assume that colorism was more prevalent in Atlanta in the 1980s and 1990s when they were coming of age. However, colorism still exists in modern-day Atlanta.

Zen is 23 and he remembers colorism in his community:

I don’t think I had a problem with any other races and they didn’t have a problem with me. Only until you get to our own race, did I see issues with me in the same race, like colorism. In 9th and 10th grade, I had these two guys or three that used to bully and mess with me and my best friends cause we were light skin. Called us white and stereotype names. Only the dark-skin guys…. I didn’t know then, but I know now that I had a light skin privilege. Like white privilege. But looking back on it, I got away with some stuff my other friends wouldn’t have gotten away with. Like me and my best friend Benny who’s also pretty light like my color. We ended up leaving school to get lunch off campus and we wasn’t supposed to. Sneaking in in the back, we get caught by my academic advisor who I helped with his dissertation and he was like yall get in-school suspension. We went to his office and he was like naw yall good, just don’t do it again. But it was like the third or fourth time he caught us. I think it was cause we was light skin and in the math and science program.

In Zen’s case, we see a resurgence of the way systemic racism plays into the educational advantages, light-skinned blacks can obtain (Landry 1987), further driving a division between light and dark-skinned blacks. Kids at school bullied Zen for being light skinned. Like Jermaine, he also recognized that there was a privilege that was associated with his complexion. In school, he committed the same infractions as other students; however, his complexion and academics offered him pardons in school that other students did not receive. As stated earlier,
historically, whites often allowed lighter-skinned blacks to attend schools of higher education, while darker-skinned blacks were denied admittance into certain institutions (Landry 1987). In the same tradition, Zen realized that he was light skinned, and authority figures overlooked his behavioral infractions because of his complexion and academic standing, thus making it easier for him to attend college. His poor behavior may not have shown up on his academic record because his skin allowed him a pardon, which may not have been the case for students of a darker color.

Jordan was born in metro Atlanta, but raised in South Carolina. Eventually, he moved back to metro Atlanta and now at the age of 27, he recalls experiencing colorism and how light-skinned privilege seemed to exist in reverse outside of Atlanta:

I remember I was in South Carolina. I sat out as a young boy in the sun. It gets hot as all get out. I would sit in the sun, so I could fit in with my friends. I would go sit in the sun, because they would call me "white boy". Then when I get down here, it's kind of the opposite. Opposite, in that you didn't get picked on for being lighter. No, down here it was better to be light. A lot cooler down here, I realized, if I stay in the house, I can get lighter. It’s all asinine when I look back. Ridiculous. The blacker the better, really?

In South Carolina, Jordan found that people favored dark skin over light skin. This dynamic was so apparent that Jordan tried to purposely make himself darker to fit in by spending extra time in the sun. However, in Atlanta his light skin was more accepted. This constant change in identity, accepted complexion and region makes colorism in the black community a complex and ever-changing phenomenon. In some places, people favor dark skin over light skin, and in other places, the reverse can exist. In both instances, internalized racism and the hierarchy of skin color and its relationship with whiteness is important. This dynamic causes division within the black community, thus perpetuating defensive othering and making the race as a whole less able to unite against larger issues of race that affect us across complexion categories.
While many Atlanta native participants experienced colorism in their black communities, light skin/dark skin division is not specific to Atlanta. Blacks from all over the country recognized this schism in their experience. Kennyshia recalls being a dark-skinned girl in rural Georgia:

It’s crazy like in college or being in high school we had that light skin vs dark skin and that brought issues with myself cause I was like well I’m dark skin…It made me think like I’m dark skin does that mean that I’m ugly like. It also brought that change too because having a light-skinned friend cause she was pretty and everyone wanted to date her and you just had this and I was naïve as a child. I was like, she light skinned you’re dark skinned, most people like light skin anyway.

Like Zen, Kennyshia recognized how colorism played a role in her interpersonal actions. However, modern technology has allowed for colorism to be more hegemonic and pervasive. Devices and social networks constantly remind young people of the light skin/dark skin complex. I asked Kennyshia when she started seeing colorism in her life, and she later states:

Social media. That kinda brought it up. Cause social media takes it to a whole new level and bring it to society and surroundings. I would get the comment under my pictures like you cute for a black girl under my pictures. Or you cute for a dark-skinned girl. I’m like what does that mean. Like I’m black. She light skinned. She black too. Things like that I used to hate that comment like I’m cute and I just happened to be black. Like don’t put that together as if that defined who I was. So mostly it was social media. And being on a college campus and everyone’s following social media and going into their personal lives. I saw it more and felt like it was kinda true. But as I grew into myself and joined black clubs, I realized people are being ignorant and they trying to pick out of their own community, where in reality we all still the same.

Although color division in the black community has existed for centuries, younger kids are surrounded by these constructs due to social media. With technology being such an important part of social life, strangers and friends can comment and spread colorist ideas all over the world with the click of a button. Although older black people experienced colorism, they were able to create spaces where it may not have been as apparent. However, technology forces young black people through social media to be victims of these ideas and they must make more
of a conscious effort to ignore these internalized racist views that can appear on their phones in a split second.

Angelina, a young middle-class woman from Georgia, remembers the way colorism played a role in her educational experience. She recalls being in college and learning about the famous doll tests where examiners placed black kids in front of a black doll and white doll. Scholars asked them a series of questions about the doll. The results suggest that a byproduct of segregation is that black children tend to feel that whites are superior to them mentally and aesthetically. In the experiment, when examiners asked the kids asked about the intelligence or positive behavior of the dolls, black children were more likely to choose white dolls and label them prettier or smarter than the black dolls. This experiment conducted by Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark is one of the foundational tests used to discuss internalized racism. Although this test dates back to the 1930’s, Angelina remembers experiencing students making similar choices when she was in school:

I was sitting in class at [a university] and one of my professors, I’m almost certain was talking about looking at pictures and a person would say the black child was bad and the white child wasn’t. It’s so weird cause I remember seeing that in elementary school. I remember seeing kids choose white dolls over black dolls.

Colorism is not specific to the black American experience, but racism, slavery and colonization was also rooted in the creation of modern Caribbean countries. Anti-black racism in the “west indies,” has led to intraracial and class division as plays a huge role in island culture. Tia is a 44-year-old middle-class Atlanta transplant from Florida, however her family is of Jamaican descent. She explains the colorism in Jamaican society this way:

A little background with me. My father was in Jamaica. He is from a very poor side, and my mother is from a better well-off side. They went through the same kind of issues as well. Just having class issues from being from two different classes, and then there is the complexion issue. My father is very dark skinned, and my mother is brown skinned.
There is that issue. My father proved that he was going to be a better man to take care of my mom.

In addition to class divisions, Jamaicans also are subject to divisions within their community based on complexion. Tia’s father felt that he had to overcompensate for his skin by working hard to provide for his family. He saw his dark skin as a barrier that he had to overshadow by his work ethic.

Bivens uses the standard frame to argue that blacks suffer from internalized racism when they set white characteristics of beauty as the standard or level of acceptance. Historically, white supremacy favored light-skinned blacks over dark-skinned blacks and made them the black standard of white acceptance, which set the stage for colorism in the black community. Over time, blacks began to institutionalize colorism and would not allow dark-skinned blacks to inhabit certain spaces or receive certain benefits from their community such as entering schools or certain social organizations. In the middle of the twentieth century, African Americans explicitly addressed the issue of blackness in the black community by making black cool and beautiful. As a counternarrative to the Standards frame, black people felt they were taking their power back through the Black is Beautiful Movement and songs like “I’m Black and I’m Proud” by James Brown. While these cultural motifs instilled a sense of identity and pride in many blacks during that time, some people used this cultural explosion to further marginalize lighter-skinned blacks who some blacks saw as racially inauthentic, or not “really” black. While some people may claim that this Standards frame characterized by colorism is not prevalent in the modern world, popular culture and my research data shows that colorism, Bivens’ Standards frame, and intraracial division still exists in the lives of the newer generation.
5.3.1.2Thinking Black

While colorism is a more popular example of standards, participants also exhibited standards in other ways. Danny is a 49-year-old third generation Atlanta native who grew up in poverty. After enlisting in the military and attending school, he eventually earned his PhD and is currently living a middle-class lifestyle in the city. While talking about race, Danny argues that black people need to stop “thinking black”. He describes how his sister went to purchase a car, but did not take his advice and negotiate with the salesman. Instead, she got excited, looked at the car she liked, purchased it, and ended up paying more than Danny would’ve paid for the car. He describes this as “thinking black”. This phrase alludes to the idea that a negative, impetuous way of thinking is the “black” standard. He associates “thinking black” with being immature and impulsive. While Danny does not outright say that “thinking white” is better, he implies that because in our conversations we were discussing race within a black/white context. If “thinking black” was associated with being negative, then “thinking white” or “thinking non-black” would be a more positive way of assessing a situation. Therefore, Danny claims that one’s standard of thinking would improve if they take a “non-black” approach, in other words, don’t think like a black person.

Danny also admits that at one point, he felt that white standards for academia was higher than his, even though society segregated him from whites all his life while living in Atlanta. In short, whites were almost deified as a group that was always better than his racial group. However, once he enlisted in the military and began to interact with whites on a more personal level, he realized they were not “better” or “smarter” than him at all:

I’m a veteran, so I went into the [military] after high school. And when I was in boot camp, that was the first time I socially engaged with white folks….And so I was talking to these men, and I would be talking about books I had read in high school and things I had done. And I was like, these are some dumb motherfuckers. They’re not no – they’re not no – and that took away and began to chip away this mystique about white people.
That they kind of are in some mystical rich place that we can never attain. That experience in boot camp -- I remember being -- the first moment of humanizing white folks versus deifying them.

Because society systematically segregated Danny from white people, he was socialized to believe that the education he was receiving would always be substandard to what whites received on the other side of town. However, integrating with white folks in the military and seeing that they did not appear to be as advanced as he was intellectually, he lowered his standards for whiteness and realized that his “black” education was just as good if not better than their “white” education.

5.3.1.3 The Whiter The Better

In a hegemonic white society, whiteness appears to be superior in every significant aspect of life. It appears that whites have the better jobs, more money, more opportunities, and better education. This appearance is purposeful in that whites not only control the system in which they function, but control the perception of whiteness through the media. This perception causes many people of color in segregated areas to assume that the standard of whiteness is what people should ascribe to and in some ways, deify whiteness as godlike. However, integration can be a remedy to this perception, in that once people of color interact with some whites, they not only realize that all whites do not meet this standard of white godlikeness, but that standards in black society can be just as good as the standards in white society.

Jermaine spoke highly of his upbringing in a working and middle-class black neighborhood in inner-city Atlanta. However, he noticed a lot of negative changes that began to occur in his neighborhood.

It’s been negative unfortunately. And all of it seems to be economic. The businesses are mostly Hispanic and Asian ownership…. The children sought other housing opportunities. They didn’t stay in the neighborhood. They didn’t keep up their parents’ home. They didn’t take over the family business. They went further to Alpharettas or
Douglasville, one of those two places, seemingly searching for something better, but that led to a lot of other things happening.

It appears that Standards can lead to systemic oppression. With this belief that white neighborhoods are better than predominately black ones, a whole thriving black community experienced negative turnaround. I am not arguing that the out-migration of affluent blacks causes urban decay and neighborhood disadvantage (Wilson 1987, Patillo 1999). Research and my interview data shows that deindustrialization and unemployment also plays a major role in the underdevelopment of black communities (Wilson 1987). However, the adoption of the Standards frame by more affluent residents can remove the strong economic base from the black community.

Tia exhibited the Standards frame as it pertains to school choice for higher education. When asked about her feelings related to the Atlanta University Center, Tia stated:

My parents would not let me do anything all black. I wanted to go to [the AUC] and my parents were like, hell no….I am still fighting with preconceived ideas about blacks….I am such a realist that people still look at where you went to school and size you up. I am conscience about associating myself with an all-black school, if you decide to move outside of Atlanta.

At one point in Tia’s life, she highly regarded black schools. However, her parents instilled in her the Standards frame and the notion that black schools are not as high of a standard as white schools. This indoctrination led her to adopt the white racial frame and conclude that white institutions are inherently better than black ones. However, there is something in her mind telling her that this is not true. However even as an adult, she is still battling with these internalized racist ideas. Even though higher ed sources rank many black colleges high on their list in categories of academics and research, and white corporations heavily recruit from black
colleges, the Standards frame is so internalized that it is difficult for her to look past her belief that whiteness in terms of schools is better than blackness.

5.3.2 Naming the Problem

This research study explores the way blacks across social identities understand and negotiate race and racism. It also explains the way these negotiation strategies reinforce intraracial divisions and perpetuate internalized racism. While blacks can be the victims of anti-black racism by whites in ways that are gendered and regioned, they can also internalize these same negative feelings and attitudes towards black people and reinforce them within their own racial group. This behavior is known as internalized racism and categorized by Donna Bivens into four frames. The first frame is called Standards, and it describes the way people of color use Eurocentric values, aesthetics and norms as the model of propriety for their own culture. The second most popular of Bivens’ IR frames that was exhibited in my research was Naming the Problem. In this frame, people of color see racism or racist acts as a problem caused by the victim. An example of Naming the Problem would be people of color blaming high incarceration rates in the black community on blacks being more prone to violence, as opposed to state-sanctioned laws that support the criminalization of people of color, or abject poverty in black neighborhoods. Another term for this IR frame is “victim blaming”. Some researchers claim Naming the Problem, more specifically victim-blaming, can ignore critical and social, economic and environmental issues that can impact health outcomes (Smith Hung and Franklin 2011). In other words, this approach minimizes institutional racism and legitimizes racial inequalities through ideas and actions. While scholars may explore this frame within the context of interracial interaction, my research explores the way blacks may reinforce these ideas about people within their own racial group.
Sadie is a 24-year-old black woman from metro Atlanta. She is middle class because she graduated from college and lives with her middle-class parents. When asked how she felt society treated black people, Sadie claimed:

Like we all the same…And I do think my people play the race card. Like you only do this cause I’m black. Some African Americans draw attention to themselves and you already in a society where we get singled out. We don’t do things to change it. Like the whole thing with Trayvon and the hoodie and being out late. Like everybody make it seem like oh I can’t do this cause I’m black which is fine. But if you know stuff look bad, why provoke it more. And we do stuff to provoke it more cause that just how they are. And I’m fine for people standing up for they rights but you need to know what your rights are. Like they say they don’t treat us right. But how is it that you supposed to be treated? What’s fair and what’s not fair if you not educating yourself.

Sadie admits that society treats black people all the same, suggesting that there are some unwarranted bias directed towards black people. However, she quickly turns the rest of the response back on the people that are victims of racism. Sadie argues that black people draw attention to themselves by wearing things that make you look more “suspicious”. She places the blame back on black people by saying blacks do things to provoke unlawful behavior. She then argues that the victims of racism should educate themselves on the proper police protocol, so that they have the right to demand fair treatment. She minimizes the institutional racism put forth by police misconduct, unfair court trial and legal system that supports them, and instead places the responsibility on black people by saying they should educate themselves.

While Sadie exhibited Naming the Problem by placing the responsibility of addressing police misconduct on black folks, Tia makes a similar claim while explaining gentrification. Although she recognizes the way white gentrification negatively affects black people and neighborhoods, she also starts to blame black folks for their own displacement:

I wish we could come together and take over prime real estate instead of letting other people come in and take over. I don’t know the make-up of the people who are supposed to live in these areas. I’m sad. I wish, if they could clean up how they live and what they, I guess that is why I struggle. Why can’t we come in and do certain things
ourselves? Instead, we allow others to come in and tell us where to live and how we are going to live.

This is another example of ignoring the social and environmental effects, and homing in on the responses (or lack thereof) by the victims of gentrification. Instead of recognizing how big corporations and wealthy families that benefit from racialized wealth disparities bully politicians and small businesses into taking over urban areas and force people out of their homes, Tia attributes gentrification to lack of unity in the black community, the trash in the areas, and black people “allowing” others to push us around. Placing the blame back on the minorities allows others to perceive that black people are weak and have a lack of concern for their own destiny, thus perpetuating the stereotype that black people are lazy, immature and in need of control.

Later, I asked Tia how she felt society treats black people. Her statement also expresses a Naming the Problem response:

Terrible. We are still second-class citizens. I don’t think it matters what we do, until it spills over in their community. I don’t want to put it all on them. I think until we can come together and figure out. I’m lost for what the answers are on how we can come together. Until we can figure that, it’s hard to say how they should treat us, when we don’t have respect for ourselves.

Initially, Tia realizes that larger society mistreats black people and recognizes that racism can be systemic. Then, she quickly moves to the IR Naming the Problem approach and begins to blame mistreatment of blacks on the lack of unity that exists in black communities. Therefore, she argues that blacks must improve the way they treat themselves before they can expect better treatment from whites, thus naming “blacks” as the source and solution for their own mistreatment. Later, Tia has a verbal battle with herself while trying to understand whether black people and their current situation is truly systemic, or if it is because of our own actions. Readers can see her pathway in and out of Internalized Racism:
I love my people. I understand it. I struggle myself with I am a black person. God, am I one of those people that people have a hard time having a conversation with? Am I quick-tempered, ready to blame everyone else? I think that is part of the problem. We don’t look inward. It is killing us. The mindset of black people is still enslaved. We are not truly free yet. How do we get free? I don’t know. Am I hurting the situation by removing myself? Probably so. Am I a believer? My siblings believe that the sooner we integrate and mix, it will be so muddled we won’t look at who is black and white. Will this make a difference? Maybe. Do I want to help? Yes. Do I want to be immersed in it? Not particularly. I am so frustrated with black people as a whole. Looking at the news, I understand it is uneven and they portray us a certain way. Can we stop giving them something to look at?

It is easy to say Tia is a middle-class black woman suffering from “self-hatred” and internalized racism. However, racism is so hegemonic, pervasive and part of our everyday lives that it exists whether whites are present or not.

### 5.3.4 Resources and Decision Making

Bivens’ last two frames Resources and Decision-making were not as evident in my data collection as the first two frames. Resources is the IR frame that claims having resources that are specific to non-white communities and not serving everybody and can self-sabotage their own economic benefits. They refuse to support a business or resource that is unique to their culture. While this frame may be evident in other examples of intraracial division, I did not find any participants who had negative opinions on black-owned businesses or resources, because they did not serve everybody. All the participants who responded to the questions about black businesses recognized the importance of blacks supporting their own stores. In addition, many preferred black companies and had good experiences with businesses that provided resources specific to the black community.

Bivens describe Decision-making as people of color who do not trust black people in power to make decisions for their racial group. They prefer nonblacks, specifically whites, to make decisions for them, as they feel whites are more competent about the needs of people of color, than people in their own racial group. Similar to Resources, I found very few people that
subscribed to this IR frame. When asked if black people should allow other people to help us solve our own issues, Zen stated:

If we had other people help us, cause they been through that scenario. Cause Italians and Irish have all been treated as second-class citizens compared to whites who were here, and they eventually built themselves up out of poverty. But black people are still ostracized and seen as different.

Zen argues that other (European) whites who were mistreated by “American whites” were eventually able to pull themselves out of poverty and create opportunities for their people, therefore, they can offer advice to black people so that we can also reach the same goal. This IR frame perpetuates the myth that people of color cannot take care of themselves, but need help from white leaders and people to help us solve our own issues. A full historical and structural analysis would help Zen understand that many Europeans voluntarily traveled to the U.S. for a better life, while a majority of black Africans were forced here under the harsh conditions of slavery. In addition to slavery, consistent racial policies, practices, Jim Crow traditions, mass incarceration and lynching has led to black people’s current condition, as opposed to immigrant Europeans who white Americans eventually adopted into whiteness in the 20th century. Soon, they benefitted from the same policies that U.S. whites have.

While Zen’s example stands out, most participants did not view whites as so superior that they should make decisions for us. The lack of evidence supporting the Resources and Decision-Making frames confirms my call for forwarding of our assessment of internalized racism. The belief that blacks would fare better under white leadership, or blacks should ignore black-owned businesses because they do not support everybody may be common in other states; however, given the unique history and structure of Atlanta, it does not surprise me that these beliefs are not as common among its city’s residents. In Atlanta, black leadership is so conventional and, in many ways, expected, that white leadership would probably be critiqued harder than black
decision makers. Atlanta has grown from a big southern city into a world-class commercial hub under black legislators and a predominately black political tradition. The success of and constant imagery of black decision makers on the city and neighborhood levels is so apparent and popular, that to assume white people are more competent and would have a better understanding of the needs of black people in Atlanta may be more far-fetched in this city, than a city where white leadership is more of the norm. In addition to decision makers, black-owned businesses that provide resources for black people are also very common and accepted in Atlanta. To assume that it is somehow reverse racism, or they should not be supported because of their uniqueness may be foreign to residents who live in a city where minority-owned businesses provide hundreds, if not thousands of jobs in the city. Cooperative economics is a key characteristic among Atlanta’s black population. In addition, big white businesses don’t appear affected by the number of black-owned businesses concentrated in the predominately black Southside of the city. Therefore, the Resources frame may not be as evident in a city with so many successful black-owned businesses and residents that benefit from black resources.

Although these last two frames are not evident in Atlanta, I argue that internalized racism is still apparent even in the “Black Mecca”. However, it is important that research broadens our understanding of the way blacks perpetuate racist ideas among black people in predominately black spaces. The way internalized racism works is that traditional white racism becomes so hegemonic and embedded in minorities’ way of life, that when it appears to have dissipated or lost its vigor, victims of racism perpetuate these same racist notions within their own groups. Atlanta appears to be fertile ground for internalized racism as the city has already been successful at hiding its racism and heavily concentrating its wealth within the “white side of town” and its poverty on the “black side of town”. In the next section, I explore the way
internalized racism plays out in the lives of various Atlanta residents. While Donna Bivens’ frames certainly provide a strong foundation for understanding the way racism can be perpetuated within racial groups, my research suggests that some of Bivens’ frames may not apply to many blacks who live in Atlanta. I argue that the black political and economic influence in Atlanta provides a direct contrast to some of Bivens’ frames, making it more difficult to internalize certain racist frames when there are clear and prominent examples that invalidate them. In this next section, I explain in further detail why some of Bivens’ frames may not be accepted by many Atlanta residents. However, I make the claim that there are other frames that scholars should consider when addressing internalized racism among minority groups. The following section offers three additional categories that scholars should include when discussing the ways minorities reinforce racist ideas within their own racial group. I call these three additional frames Grant’s IR Frames.

5.4 Grant’s IR Frames

5.4.1 Lack of Systemic Analysis

When people of color do not take into account the racist structures and institutions put in place that continue to keep nonwhites at a disadvantage, it can cause minorities to see other people of color as the cause of their own problems. The lack of a systemic analysis is part of Bivens’ Naming the Problem frame, as victim-blaming can be the result of ignoring larger environmental and social issues. However, I argue that a person can overlook these larger racial issues without exhibiting the Naming the Problem frame. Ignoring the way systemic racism plays a role in the inequality forced upon minority groups can bring about internalized racist ideas. Anatha recognizes that racism exists and, she does not blame blacks for their own subjugation. However, she does not consider the larger structural issues that can result in the high rates of in-group violence in the black community:
We’re treated unfairly but we treat each other unfairly. I don’t know…I feel indifferent. I mean, when you see and hear a lot of our people doing wrong to each other then, when somebody white does it we’re like ok they did us wrong but we do each other wrong. I don’t know. That’s why I’m indifferent about it. When all this stuff kicked off with black lives matter and people protesting, but then when you find out that June-bug done shot Bo-Bo. I don’t know, I guess indifferent.

While Anatha does not explicitly blame other black people for the way that the dominant society treats them, her lack of a systemic analysis leads her to feel indifferent about racism. This indifference may cause her to reinforce racist ideas such as the “black-on-black” crime rhetoric, and the argument that black people should not protest police brutality until they have properly addressed in-group violence. As a counter to the cry for Black Lives Matter, many people including whites began to bring up the conversation of “black-on-black crime”. The explanation stated that black people could not properly critique white people and police officers for being violent towards them, if they are violent towards each other. This is the basis of Anatha’s response. However, whites and white law enforcement who commit crimes against people of color, are often dismissed or ignored by the larger justice system and the victims of these crimes and their families are often forced to live the rest of their lives without receiving any justice for the crimes committed against them. A structural analysis of racialized occurrences will help people of color see that criminal activity among blacks sometimes occur in poor black communities where underserved and disadvantaged residents reside. Many of these survival crimes are committed out of a reaction to the structural oppression brought on by deindustrialization, gentrification and poverty. Black Lives Matter and the call for a structural approach to addressing racism is not asking for us to ignore in-group violence, but to recognize the larger systemic issues that play a role in interpersonal behavior. Ignoring these larger issues and a lack of a systemic analysis can lead people of color to draw negative stereotypical
conclusions about their own group and even speak out against people who are fighting to bring
an end to the prejudice and racism in our society.

Terra, a working-class Atlanta transplant, is another participant that does not explicitly blame
black people for their current situation. However, her lack of a systemic analysis leads her to
praise white people for the benefits that they receive:

The only reason why things are nicer in white neighborhoods is because they speak up. I
speak up and ask the grocery store man. I want some smoked turkey. Why I gotta go to
Kroeger to get my smoked turkey? But if no one ever tells them they want it, why would
they change? If no one ever complains, then no one knows there is a problem to be fixed.
That’s why white people get what they want, because they feel they are entitled to it and
they speak up.

Instead of victim blaming, Terra does what I call *victor praising*, which is when people praise
whites for working hard and ignore the privilege and social benefits whites receive to achieve
economic mobility. While I do not consider victor praising a separate IR frame, I argue that it is
a strategy used to help reinforce certain IR characteristics such as a lack of a systemic analysis.

Terra claims that white people reap certain benefits and live in thriving communities because
they speak up for themselves. However, she does not take into account the larger businesses that
solely invest in white areas, racial residential segregation that leads to increased property value
in predominately white areas, or the employment opportunities that are disproportionately given
to whites over blacks, which positively affect the economics and spending power in their
neighborhoods. While Terra does not blame black people for certain behaviors in this response,
she does provide undue praise to white people for benefits that many did not necessarily work
for, but was inherited by them in the form of white privilege. Reinforcing victor praising without
considering the larger structural privileges that whites receive can perpetuate the racist idea that
blacks do not work as hard as whites, which explains why blacks continue to maintain a lower
social status than whites.
5.4.2 Ethnic Divide

People should employ a structural analysis to properly assess differing race experiences. This strategy can keep people of color from perpetuating internalized racism by victim blaming (naming the problem), or victor praising (providing whites undue praise). In addition to this, my research shows that another common practice by blacks when reinforcing racist stereotypes is that many of them maintain negative assumptions about black people of a different ethnic group. I label this frame the ethnic divide because it shows how internalized racism leads to internal marginalization along ethnic lines. While Black is a race, there are various ethnic groups within the black race such as Black American, Afro-Carribean, African, Afro-British, Afro Latinx, etc. This ethnic divide causes some blacks to conclude that people of another ethnic group do not properly represent the race, or exhibit undesirable characteristics of blackness. These negative stereotypes often lead to an already existing approach called defensive othering, where some ethnic groups will not see themselves as black, demonize blackness, and prefer to associate with white people. When blacks adopt negative ideas about other blacks, without data or research to support these notions, they create unfounded myths that can result in identity separation within the racial group. The most popular example of this ethnic divide is in the relationship between black Americans and black immigrants.

Tia’s Jamaican parents raised her. They migrated to the United States and worked hard to achieve socio economic mobility. With the help of white businessmen who offered him advice, provided opportunities, and became his main clientele, her father’s income increased. Therefore, his experience as a black man who “made it” by working hard caused him to create negative assumptions about poor African Americans:

I wasn’t allowed to be around the blacks in the neighborhood….My parents have changed a lot. They had a thought process about black Americans. When they were in Chicago, Their exposure to black Americans were very different. Black Americans, as they
thought, heard, and saw, were not motivated, very lazy, just come from bad experiences and didn’t really go anywhere. It was always encouraged that I should not marry or date black Americans. My choices were white, which is what everyone in my family did. I’m the only spot….Anything negative, my parents pretty much labeled black Americans….my first boyfriend, was a black American, and my parents hated him, and I understand why. It went both ways. He thought Jamaicans thought they were better than him, and they do. They have that mindset….I went across there [to the black side of town] and found my boyfriend [who eventually became her husband]. I was ostracized. My parents and I didn’t speak for 3 years.

Then she later stated:

When I started dating, there was a festival in Miami called the Goombay festival. I came home after going to this festival with a shirt on that said 100% Black on it. My parents were upset. They told me to never wear that shirt in the house again. That I am not black, I am Jamaican. I must say that my parents have grown a lot since then. They were challenged between me and my two younger brothers to rethink if they are black. They still have issues saying they are black. It is a Jamaican thing. They are not black. They might say they are white, never black. Any type of paperwork, they look at themselves as West Indian.

In Tia’s interview, her responses yielded more internalized racist views than most of my other respondents. Her Jamaican father taught her to disassociate herself from anything related to blackness and focus on identifying as Jamaican, thus perpetuating the ethnic divide. Tia’s father would have rather her identify as white, than black. Her parents reprimanded her for embracing blackness and even though she has been fighting against it all her life, she would eventually make decisions to continue disassociating herself from black culture. In other words, defensive othering is extremely evident in Tia’s upbringing and greatly informs her racial position and social proximity to blackness.

History also plays a role in identity work. Tia talks about how her lack of understanding black history could have informed her negative feelings and defensive othering towards black Americans:

Jamaican history. That’s what was good. Black people were slaves. The weaker slaves. That’s how the Jamaicans looked at it. There are two sides to this. One is that the reason they could overtake the slave owners, and the Jamaicans are like, not it was the other way
around. Black Americans or the Africans taken to America and just stayed in slavery for 400 years. They were the weaker group of people who did not know how to band together and get [out of] the situation. That is pretty much all I knew about black America. Even when I go to dinners now and people are talking about Andrew Young. I know who those people are now. I learned the history. I’m like I get it. In elementary, jr. high, we had one chapter in our history book, in high school and all it said was black people were enslaved, that’s it.

Later, I explained to her how historically black Americans and Jamaicans have worked together to help achieve liberation for people of African descent. After that discussion, she responded:

I have never, ever been taught any of that, at all....I think it has worked [racial division] because every level, class, complexion, culture, and anything at all to keep us separated to make us think that one is better than the other and we go for it.

Although Tia understands that these negative ideas some Jamaicans have about black people that reinforce racist stereotypes and intraracial division is a larger ploy to keep black people segmented as a race, she returns to Naming the Problem, in the last five words of the quote “and we go for it”. Tia ultimately blames blacks for embracing these racist divisive tactics as opposed to critiquing whites and systems of education for purposely miseducating many black students and causing some to embrace ethnic divisions within their racial group. Later, she admits that she has internalized the ideas from her father, and that even in her 40s, she has not fully let go of them:

I will say that I am not fully delivered from certain mindsets instilled by my parents. I am a believer in living in certain neighborhoods, just because of the way I grew up. I’m used to having all Caucasian neighbors, so I’ve gone and done the same thing.... I tend to shy away from predominantly black anything. For me, it is critical to live, typically, I prefer all white, or a mixture where black is not the majority.

Tia’s family is not the only black immigrant family to have had negative interactions with black Americans. Alexuce found that black Americans would tease her because of her ethnicity and she would be the victim of this ethnic divide:

I felt like I had to assimilate into American culture when I came back [from Jamaica]. Because back then Sean Paul wasn’t popular yet so every accent you had made you
African, and Africans had a negative connotation for a lot of people. Like African booty scratcher. It’s not like a positive thing… Yeah black Americans have told me I’m not really black. Like they feel Caribbean is different. Like you’re not black, black. You’re different. I mean we’re all the same just a different boat ride. We all come from the [same] place. It happened a lot, especially in college. Every time I engaged in conversations with people, they would always bring that up. But I think a lot of Caribbean people use that to their advantage. Cause everybody wants the upper hand over somebody. So I hear that a lot like I just don’t understand black Americans. But I think it’s easier to say outside looking in. I’ve heard Caribbeans say in terms of why black Americans haven’t achieved certain things in the time frame that they would’ve achieved it. But I’m like its different when you live here all your life, versus you coming over. Because if you would’ve stayed where you were like it would be different. Like if I came to where you were. They may make faster strives, because people like different.

The negative ideas that black Americans had towards African people and anyone who was a Black immigrant took a toll on Alexuce’s childhood, as they were also perpetrators of the Ethnic Divide frame. She had to assimilate to gain acceptance into black America, and probably hide her accent or ethnic roots from her black American friends who felt that she was not black enough. Like Tia, she also found that some Jamaicans lacked a systemic approach to understanding the plight of black Americans. Instead of recognizing the ways black Americans have been victims of racial and economic oppression, they may conclude that there is a cultural deficiency within their group that does not exist among Jamaicans, making them less capable of overcoming the hardships brought on by slavery and racism. However, Alexuce recognizes that there are historical and social differences between Jamaicans and black Americans, and negative culturally racist conclusions about either group is unfounded and lacks a structural analysis.

Kelsey Nordstrom, an African American, also recognized the way a Caribbean person at her job reinforced internalized racist views:

I worked, like I said, for the federal government at an important time and the racism there was real, but it’s not from whites. It was from blacks from other countries who said that black Americans just can’t get out of their slavery mentality, and that’s what’s wrong with us and why we are lazy and don’t do anything by ourselves. This Jamaican guy from Trinidad.
In addition to authority figures teaching Caribbean participants these internalized racist frames, black Americans also recognize the negative perceptions people have of them. Carver, an African American, also had a similar experience:

I don’t think we’re respected in general and we’re considered the least. Other immigrant populations, Jews and Koreans and Asians get a lot more respect than African Americans. We’re seen as lazy, aggressive, unintelligent by the larger society and we get treated according to those perceptions.

In addition to this ethnic divide and the stereotypes many blacks have about other segments of the black population, some people of color like Rachel, assume other racial groups and ethnicities are further along than blacks because they have adopted a strategy that they assume we have not done yet:

Because if you look at Jewish people, yeah they’re white, but they spend their money in their own stores. They go to church together. You know, they work together. They go and back the same political candidate. They look for someone like us. We should vote for this person. They do everything as a whole, and I think that if black people stopped worrying about who gonna be in charge and who the leader is. I’m going to be in charge. You know, and actually come together and be like, all right we gonna have our own community.

Rachel assumes that black people do not come together, have their own community, or are worried about who is in charge. She also praises the Jewish community for sticking to their own, while overlooking the historical implications that contribute to these differences. During slavery, whites punished blacks for talking to each other for long periods of time or working together. When blacks began to form their own independent communities such as Tulsa, Oklahoma, Jasper, Texas and Rosewood, these areas were later burned down, and millions of dollars of black wealth and businesses were destroyed overnight due to racism. These heinous events were not as intense and frequent in the independent communities of Jewish Americans. The argument that blacks don’t or won’t support each other (which is also challenged in a later chapter) or
maintain close knit communities are false stereotypes and largely tied to historical and systemic racist actions that Rachel may not consider.

Christina, however, understands the way systemic racism plays a role in the differences in behaviors between blacks and other racial groups, thus explaining why it is misleading to compare ethnic groups outside of a historical and social context:

Koreans focus on themselves. The Jewish folks focus on themselves. I don’t think it’s selfish at all. And I don’t think that there’s enough of us focusing on ourselves to do better. But I also think that we have been taught to hate black in a way that Jews haven’t been taught to hate being Jewish and Asians haven’t been taught to hate Asians, right? So we also have that.

While Christina does not display an understanding of the way internalized racism has affected Asian Americans as a perceived model minority group (Chou 2008), she recognizes that there are differences in racialized experiences that make it dangerous to compare racial groups and people within the groups, placing one above another. Placing value on the negative assumptions some blacks have about other ethnic groups within the race leads to othering, acting as if one type of black is better or worse than another and separating oneself from blackness. It also has the same results as Naming the Problem. The Ethnic Divide frame can help some people ignore the historical and systemic explanations that can help us understand from where these stereotypes surface, and why many of them are untrue.

5.4.3 Generalization

The last frame that research should consider when analyzing Internalized Racism is generalization. Generalization occurs when people of color take isolated negative behaviors or actions and apply them to an entire race. Yet, some people of color will extend diversity of actions to other racial groups by not allowing one person or group to taint their perception of the group as a whole. For example, if one black-owned business gets shamed on the news for
mismanaging funds, then some people of color will conclude that they should not support black businesses, because they don’t know how to manage their money. However, if the news shows one white business in a negative light, many people of color will not generalize and assume that all white businesses are dishonest. One incident will not stop them from supporting white businesses. Negative generalizations placed on an entire race leads to the propagation of racialized stereotypes and acts as an additional frame for internalized racism.

Kelsey Nordstrom recognizes how this generalized frame works, specifically in the context of black colleges. When asked about her view of the Atlanta University Center (AUC):

I think it was more prominent and effective in the 70s and 80s and early 90s, before things got out of control. Before Morris Brown closed. And it seemed like people just wanted to cast that whole shadow over the entire HBCU community or AUC. Some of the things that have happened that have made the news even over at Morehouse. When something happens with one university, it seems to cast a shadow over all of them. And that’s unfortunate because those are some really strong schools with some very good endowments and great faculty and some really strong programs.

Kelsey deems it unfortunate that people draw racist stereotypical conclusions about black schools and programs based on events that occur at isolated institutions. This generalized frame places pressure on black institutions and people to represent their whole race in every decision they make, while whites can function as individuals. Therefore, society allows whites the humanity to make mistakes, or bad decisions, and blacks are required to be perfect or risk being invalidated, ostracized and unsupported.

Zen’s father grew up during the Jim Crow era, and had this to say about his racialized experiences:

Zen: Like my dad would tell me stories from his childhood….He would say that a person aint did nothing for him, but a white person helped him out. Cause like he’s 87 now so he grew up between 1930 to like 1948… He said if you get in good with white people, they will give you anything you want. He said, white people have helped him. They give him privilege and set him above black people during that time.
Interviewer: Did you adopt some of these ideas that he had about white people helping him out and getting in good with them?

Zen: I adopted some of it.

Interviewer: Do you agree with what he was saying?

Zen: Yeah, cause I wouldn’t say I manipulate them but I wanna say if you friends with a lot of white people cause they have more connections to higher up stuff than black people and with higher up being black people a lot of them only help other higher ups, like black people do. They’ll help that group. Like Alphas will help the community but they help other Alphas and connect you but they won’t go outside their own group. I don’t feel like white people would, but they are more open to talk about it outside themselves. But it goes with white people too, they only help their own lil group.

Zen’s dad casted a positive generalization on the white racial group, saying that white people were good because they helped him to get to a level where he could take care of his family. During the interview, Zen claimed his dad spoke about how a white police officer reprimanded him for drinking out of a white only water fountain. However, the police officer let him go without any further punishment. Zen’s dad praised the police officer, overlooking the structural oppression and the fact that whites had instituted segregation and there should not have been a white only water fountains in the first place. The lack of a systemic analysis in Zen’s analysis coupled with evidence of generalization leads to his current way of thinking. He assumes that because that the white police officer did not get irate with him, that white people are good and may not be violent towards others. His son, who took this idea a step further, made the negative assumption that black people only help people in their sub groups, and white people will help everyone if you get in good with them. For example, Zen concludes that men in the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity will only help other black men in the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, but not black people as a whole; therefore, blacks do not help each other as much as white people will help black people. Zen’s dad transferred his IR frame of generalization to his son, and he has now adopted the frame as well.
When asked about the importance of voting, Sadie stated:

> Very important, but people don’t take advantage. Like, we should, knowing that we had to get the right in the first place. Everything our ancestors fought for, they take advantage of it.

Sadie makes a sweeping generalization that black people do not take advantage of their voting rights and take advantage of the sacrifices people made before she was born. However, black voter turnout came to a record high in 2012 of 66.6%, higher than the Latino and Woman’s voter turnout of 48% and 63.7% respectively (Krogstad and Lopez 2017).

Danny also makes a generalization about black people in the following statement:

> That’s part of our problem. We welfare-minded. We always looking – we looking from Heaven, from Heaven, that one great leader is going to come. No. You know. He ain’t here to save you. He’s the President of everybody. You see what I’m saying? You’ve got to figure out a way.

There is a generalization and defensive othering occurring here with Danny concluding that black people are welfare minded. However, he later says that “you” got to figure out a way, which implies that the solution has to be figured out by those other people that are welfare minded, as he separates himself from those “other” kinds of black people.

A person can use the generalization frame to describe their own experiences, but IR frames are also taught to future generations (as seen in Zen’s experience) or passed to friends and acquaintances. Carver tells us a perfect example of how the people can transfer the generalization frame:

> One of my friends we were talking about this the other day and I think this was in a real estate type thing. An African-American realtor was trying to sell some property to a friend of his and I think the house had been flooded or something like that. But anyways, instead of fixing the water damage, they just put like a floor over it and my friend was talking to someone who wanted to buy the house and he said I think you should have this checked out. This is a cause for suspicion. But then he hired another inspector and they found all this rotted wood. And “T” was just livid “I told you I don’t trust black people”. That’s an extreme, but I think sometimes we feel like we can’t trust each other. Our own race. Somebody’ trying to get over on us. Outhustle us or something like that.
I’m not sure where it comes from, whether something that has been perpetuated by the media or the subconscious. But if I’m being true to myself, in my mind, I think about that. In some ways like I expect the white person to do it, but I don’t expect you to do it. And because I have that expectation that you might I guess that may drive me not to even engage.

Carver’s friend had a negative experience with a black person, and came to a generalizable conclusion that black people as a whole could not be trusted, which reinforces the stereotype that black people are manipulative and selfish. After remembering his friend’s experience, Carver realized that he also adopted the same ideas. Although he recognized that racist programming from the media can result in his internalization of a racist stereotype, he still admits that he can fall victim to generalizing black people as untrustworthy.

5.5 Conclusion

Internalized racism is the reinforcing of racial stereotypes and negative perceptions of people of color by individuals within that racial group. The reason why sociology scholars do not label these actions as self-hatred is because they argue that systemic racism is the ultimate cause of these racial stereotypes, while self-hatred assumes that this behavior exists due to a flaw in a person’s character. Structural pressures, historical oppression, social inequality and racist traditions have created an environment where racism is hegemonic and forced upon both people of color and whites. Racist ideas are embedded in the psyche of people of color that they subconsciously get reinforced in the culture and behaviors of one’s own community whether white people are present. Internalized racism is dangerous because it allows racism to exist outside of the presence of white people, and can lead them and people of color to conclude that minorities perpetuate racism among their own, thus they no longer have to take responsibility of creating and advancing the systems and culture that created race, racism, and racist ideas in the first place. Simply put, although people of color perpetuate internalized racism, systemic racism is still the root cause of it and IR would not exist without the structural oppressions that lie at the
foundation of racism. Donna Bivens breaks down internalized racism into four frames, Naming the Problem, Standards, Resources, and Decisions Making. While this framework may explain the IR actions of some black people, Atlanta as a “Black Mecca” is a unique place and provides a special testing site to examine how IR can lead to other frames. Although many people consider Atlanta a Black Mecca, it is also a place where systemic racism exists through residential and educational segregation, thus making it a place where minorities may adopt negative ideas that are caused by structural inequality. After interviewing thirty-four participants, I found that internalized racism and intraracial division was not specific or unique to specific classes, genders or other social identities. Instead, these actions were present in all groups represented. Bivens’ four concepts do not completely explain internalized racist views and interracial division. Research should also include categories such as, Generalization, Lack of A Systemic Analysis and Ethnic Divide. Based on my research, these three frames also account for a majority of the IR views found in my data collection and the intraracial division that can exist in the black community. Addressing internalized racism in its totality can allow scholars to recognize its existence and find ways to combat these stereotypical myths through knowledge of systemic racism, scientific research, and admission that reinforcing systemic racist ideas continue to drive a wedge within minority communities.

Chapter 6 addresses the way race and class intersects to shape the way blacks view larger racial issues (unemployment, police misconduct, poverty, etc). Across class categories, participants usually applied larger social issues to systemic barriers, or a person’s agency. While blacks across classes do not differ in the way they perceive structural racism, there are identity negotiation practices that exist between the black working and middle classes. This identity negotiation can cause division within the black community. The black middle class is the more
economically privileged group, however, larger racial issues make them vulnerable to downward mobility and can be an extra burden as they try to negotiate their class identity among blacks and racial identity among whites.
6 INTERSECTION OF RACE AND CLASS

Race is an important part of the black experience; however, class and the intersection between race and class allows us to draw out the nuanced complexities that exist when discussing what it means to be black in the United States (Feagin and Sikes 1994, Patillo 1999, Lacy 2008). Atlanta, a popular city for the black middle class, provides a key-testing site for exploring this intersection. The goal of intersectionality theory is to understand how varying social identities work together to explain new and unique experiences (Chow 2016). My research explores the intersection between race and class in a southern city. While much of the research on race and class examines both the black middle class and black working class (Anderson 2000, Lamont 2002, Hyra 2006), few scholars take time to explore the interconnected relationship between the two groups. While economic lines, access, and class experiences may separate black people; unlike whites, the black middle class and working class are connected geographically and continue to share the same cultural experiences, residential spaces and educational institutions (Patillo 1999). This chapter examines the ways blacks across class groups view larger social issues such as police malfeasance, unemployment, affirmative action and poverty. Two main viewpoints describe the way blacks across classes understand these issues: systemic and agency. In addition, I explore how respondents perceive people in the working class, as well as the middle class. This section analyzes the way blacks feel about people inside and outside their class groups and sheds light on the way they negotiate interaction between each other and the identity politics that can dictate solidarity and division in the black community. Through these interviews, it is evident that class plays a role in school preferences, social groups, and residential choices made by working and middle-class blacks. However, there are deeper psychological and social dynamics that explain these negotiation patterns. I delve
further into these ideas by describing the multi-layered burdens of the black middle class, and the way in which poverty functions as a paranoia that continues to haunt both working and middle-class blacks.

6.1 Perceptions of Larger Racial Issues

Middle-class and working-class blacks have experienced racism in similar ways. Both groups report negative interaction with the police, and discrimination in the workplace, (Kelly 1993, Feagin and Sikes 1994). However, financial privilege allows middle and upper-class blacks to combat racism in ways that are unavailable to working-class and poor blacks. Some of these ways include lawsuits and use of the media (Feagin and Sikes 1994). More popular stories include the shooting of unarmed black boys and girls. While Mike Brown lived in a more working-class area of Ferguson, Missouri, Trayvon Martin met his fate in his father’s middle-class neighborhood of Sanford, Fl. Research also explores the dynamic of “shopping while black” which is the practice of every day shoppers being the victim of racial profiling in retail settings (Gabbidon 2003, Schreer, Smith and Thomas 2009). Consider this example in popular culture. In 2013, Oprah Winfrey visited Switzerland to attend Tina Turner’s wedding and decided to go shopping. While there, she was interested in buying a $38,000 Tom Ford bag. The store clerk, not knowing who she was, told Oprah that the bag was too expensive for her. Oprah eventually left the store without buying the bag, which shows that blacks from diverse class groups are subject to racial misconduct in a retail setting.

Middle-class blacks are more likely than working-class blacks to interact with whites (Valdez 2015) in certain social institutions such as colleges or places of employment. I hypothesize that these varying interactions and experiences can create differing perspectives on larger issues of race. Some of the more common racialized issues that are specific to black people are: poverty, unemployment, affirmative actions, and police interaction. These issues
affect blacks in a negative way because they suffer from them at a disproportionate rate than whites. After interviewing thirty-four black Atlantans across class and gender identities, I found that there were no differences in the way middle-class and working-class blacks view larger issues of race. While some people across classes assess these problems from a systemic position, other participants argue that personal responsibility plays a role in other social issues that are specific to black people.

6.1.1 Poverty

Poverty is a racialized issue. Although it is a problem that affects people across race and ethnic backgrounds, there is a disproportionate number of black people, in poverty in comparison to whites (Farley 1988). Atlanta is one of several cities in the United States with high levels of black poverty and income equality (Berman 2015, Kotkin 2015)

6.1.1.1 Systemic

In this section, I focus on the systemic explanations black people use to understand race and poverty. Sadie is a middle-class woman who argues that large urban projects like the building of a new NFL football dome and the displacement of inner-city blacks is the cause of black poverty:

> Atlanta was a city attraction, but we didn’t need another dome. And people I knew personally got affected by the building of it. The tearing of the churches houses, etc. Its pushing people into poverty and they already on the borderline… successful black people are moving to the city cause that’s where its better and building businesses….They fix areas as if more upper class or whites move in. Then people get pushed out and we don’t have as many systems helping people who are out on their own….Then Atlanta living wage is like 11 or 12, but minimum wage is $7.25. Stuff if so high we can’t afford it, so it leads to crime.

Sadie argues that these structural issues of urban displacement and gentrification are driving already vulnerable populations under the poverty line, thus leading to criminal activity.
Tommy, a working-class black male, speaks on another systemic issue—housing. He argues that lack of access to proper housing can result in poverty:

First of all, real estate. They don't have a place to stay. Requirements. Some are viewed as insane or crazy. There's just not enough help. If people would roll up their sleeves and help, then we could get a lot of them off the street. Some really need help. They can't do it by themselves. They are homeless and we keep trying to help. They keep going to jail….Housing is what it comes down to.

Tommy brings up additional issues such as the jail system, but, the lack of housing assistance is the main reason for poverty.

Alexuce, another working-class Atlanta native, feels that the more privileged people and the larger structures of Atlanta do not do enough to help the disadvantaged:

Cause I feel like most people who are middle class come from those types of families already and so we do a good job of helping the middle-class people continue to stay middle class. Not leave there but stay there. And we don’t really help the ones that wanna get out of their situation altogether. And people who work with the homeless population complain all the time about how they don’t really have the means to help them and the city’s not really helping them. More concerned with having them not be outside looking homeless, instead of trying to fix the situation. So, Atlanta doesn’t do a good job of helping people who are already downtrodden and helping them move up. That’s not something Atlanta really focuses on.

Alexuce concludes that Atlanta’s city leaders create social institutions and opportunities that recycle the middle class. However, even in these institutions, it is difficult for the middle class to experience economic mobility and move to the upper class. As stated earlier, Alexuce argues that Atlanta is the type of city that will allow you to thrive in whatever class you already have access too, but it is likely that it will not provide you with the means to experience upward mobility.

In Michele Lamont’s (2002) book *Dignity of Working Men*, one finding that frequently came up in her analysis was working-class blacks are more accepting of the poor than whites and quicker to offer structural explanations to poverty, as opposed to individual reasons. Therefore,
social status is not a characteristic of high morality, since most black working-class respondents do not believe that people of color function on a playing field that is equal to whites. I found this same concept in my research, as many blacks offered systemic reasons for poverty. However, working-class respondents were not the only people to see flaws in the social structure as the main reason for poverty in the black community. Della and her husband make almost a quarter of a million dollars a year. Yet, when I asked her about her perceptions of black poverty in Atlanta, she stated:

I think when you see so many black people doing well, it’s easy to be complacent about the people who are not and I think that a lot of the black power structure come from the middle class and they have done things to serve the middle class as opposed to the low-income.

Della sees that Atlanta is unique because the political power structure is in the hands of black people. Because of that, middle-class and privileged blacks benefit from this advantage. However, larger power structures seem to overlook the low-income blacks, and this causes poverty to stay concentrated in predominately black areas.

Giselle, another middle-class Atlanta transplant, attributes poverty to a flaw in the social structure:

I think there aren’t enough programs available. Okay so let’s break this down. We have all these kids who are living in poverty. Who are there parents? Do they have criminal history backgrounds? What kind of public assistance are they getting? Are the schools getting involved? Cause see a lot of times, schools get involved in the kids in poverty to punish the parent who’s already trying. Put the parent in jail. Now the parent can’t get a job. So now the kids will probably be in foster care or wherever and puts the parent in worse. So, they’re needs to be more rehabilitation programs…I also think that philanthropy here doesn’t go to the people who need it. So, with all these millions and trillions of dollars, there is no reason that the Black Mecca can’t do something to purchase housing….There is no reason that, that many black kids should be living in poverty in Atlanta. There has to be a case by case basis. Put em in houses. Give em grants. Give em jobs. Help em start businesses. Not just that but financial literacy is extremely important…so there needs to be more programs.
Giselle lays out a series of problems in a person’s life that can result in a life of poverty. Schools may focus on impoverished kids and report certain behavior that may lead to the incarcerated parents. They may be less likely to secure job opportunities upon release, or kids may go into foster care. She critiques Atlanta for having millions and trillions of dollars in the city budget, yet there are not enough job, housing and business programs to help those who are in need.

Jermaine, a middle-class Atlanta native, attributed racialized poverty to many of the structures that keep black people at a disadvantage:

It ties into all the things we talked about. The political structure being unconcerned with the lower-income working-class African Americans, and has a lot to do with the availability of jobs that appeal to a group of people that are uneducated and unskilled because the skills they have don’t match the jobs today, which [leads to] generation after generation of unemployed, unskilled people. Because their kids follow them and they do nothing. Price of living has been historically low compared to other places, but its changing pretty fast so it goes back to affordable housing. If the majority of your money is just going to a place to stay, then how productive as a citizen or how enjoyable is your life, period, if that’s all you have, literally a roof over your head. So, all these things. It’s the way the city is sectioned off as far as race and economic status. The lower income people are shoved into certain areas and the services are reduced and businesses become obsolete and food deserts. It’s a marginalization of the poor.

In his response, Jermaine went down a list of the key social institutions that contribute to poverty. He spoke on the political structure being unconcerned with the needs of the poor. Later, he critiqued the education system for not providing the poor population with skills that match modern industry. Then, he made mention of unaffordable housing, gentrification, unequal business practices and finally food desserts. All of the reasons Jermaine named are systemic barriers that can be linked to poverty.

6.1.1.2 Agency

Some black participants across class groups saw social structures such as housing, education, food deserts and politics as key factors contributing to the high levels of poverty in the “Black Mecca”. In contrast, other participants felt that agency and personal responsibility
resulted in a person’s impoverished state. Zen is a working-class Atlanta native who argues that families who perpetuate heteronormative ideas play a significant role in poverty:

It’s a high level of teens who are poverty-stricken and it’s mostly LGBT and they are in a black household that’s heavily heteronormative. So, if you veer from that, then it’s kinda like you’re seen as different in the household and was ostracized. So, they tempted to leave the house and make it on their own… That’s what I learned from taken different classes, that a majority of homeless youth are LGBT and black.

Many children and young adults are forced to “make it on their own” because of the marginalization of gay and lesbian youth in minority families. In order for them to be true to who they are, they may have to disassociate themselves from the financial security of their families (Acosta 2013), thus contributing to increasing poverty among black youth.

Anatha had this to say about the high levels of poverty in Atlanta:

I’m in the music industry and I know a lot of people, young people that are chasing their dreams as a rapper, actresses and actors. They try to live a lifestyle above their means and end up robbing Peter to pay Paul. I don’t know if that’s the answer. Like I said, when I moved to Atlanta in 1993, every guy I met was a producer, in the music industry or something or whatever. Every guy I’d run into was into music…It’s probably at an even bigger magnitude now but I think people overspend in order to appear and look like…. Let me be honest with you, I used to go out with my son doing promo and even when he made it, we’d go to these clubs and I’m looking at these people spend a thousand dollars, two thousand dollars and even five thousand dollars on their outfit…I try to live as normal as possible. I live in the same house. I drive the same car. I still got my 2010 Lexus. I don’t know if that come with age but everybody in Atlanta try to look and act rich…So, why do I think a lot of people are in poverty? My answer would be because they’re living way above their means. I know there are a lot of people living in Atlanta that are struggling.

While Anatha realizes that there are some people who need help so that they can get on their feet, she attributes a lot of the reasons for poverty to people living above their means. Because she is in the entertainment industry, she argues that people in Atlanta are quick to look richer than what they are. The cost that it takes to maintain this façade drives some people further into debt and can eventually result in poverty. I delve deeper into the black middle-class façade in the next chapter.
Kennyshia, a middle-class graduate student, claims that poverty exists in Atlanta because many blacks have forgotten where they come from. People within the more privileged class have ignored the needs of the more disadvantaged group, thus leading to the overwhelming poverty in the city:

Some are selfish. You go there and they forgot where they came from. Black people forgot where they came from and people become selfish and they don’t do what Kendrick Lamar tell them and be humble.

Rea is a middle-class Atlanta transplant from Michigan who also argues that poverty exists because more privileged people do not give back to those who need assistance:

I think there are many successful black people that don’t care about giving back or helping another brother or sister. I think that exists. And I think that there is a desire that I made it and I’m trying to make sure I’m situated. Don’t know if I can help you.

Like Kennyshia, Rea attributes poverty to the lack of care shown by more privileged people. She also sees personal responsibility as a key reason why there are a significant number of poor people in the city. While she presents an analysis that centered on agency, she also recognizes that there is a system that plays a role in these poverty outcomes. She later claims, “So, I think that poverty exists because of people and capitalism. You gotta be broke for me to be rich. I mean that may be extreme. I think it’s like I’m trying to do better and their like, you gotta get yours too”. For a moment, Rea saw the system of capitalism as the source for poverty, yet she quickly returned to her agency analysis by placing blame on people that are not willing to help others.

6.1.2 Unemployment

In January 2018, CNN political pundit, Van Jones, interviewed rapper and businessman Jay Z. Jones asked Jay Z to respond to Trump’s remarks about “third world” countries (predominately black ones) being labeled “shithole” countries. Jay Z replied, “You (Trump) are
so misinformed because these places have beautiful people and beautiful everything”. Jones later responded that the black unemployment rate is at a record low under the Trump administration. Jay Z stated that money is not the most important factor, and later alluded that Trump should treat people like human beings. According to the Washington Post, the black unemployment rate reached a record low of 6.8 percent in December 2017. However, Philip Bump of the Post wrote, “It’s not as if black unemployment was 18 percent under Barack Obama, and as soon as Trump took office, it plummeted. Black unemployment fell fairly consistently from 2010 on, as did the rate for whites and Hispanics…” Even at 6.8 percent, the unemployment rate for blacks is still well above the rate for white people at 3.7 percent (DePillis 2018), which is one reason why it is a racialized issue.

The disproportionate number of black people in concentrated poverty has been the result of many different social factors. William Julius Wilson, in his classic text The Truly Disadvantaged (1987), argues factors such as deindustrialization and marriageability explain the unemployment, poverty and crime rates situated in the American ghetto. In the present-day, unemployment is still racialized with a large percentage of the jobless population being comprised of people of color.

6.1.2.1 Systemic

Similar to the results in the poverty section, respondents across class and gender identities linked the issue of joblessness in the black community to both systemic inequality as well as personal responsibility. Rea, a middle-class woman who is an Atlanta transplant from Michigan, argues that the prison system is one of the key contributors to the high levels of unemployment in the black community. The fact that many black people do not receive second chances after leaving prison can leave many unemployed or underemployed and vulnerable when given a
chance to engage in illegal activity (Alexander 2010). Jeffrey, a middle-class man, says that unemployment can be the result of racism in hiring practices. He claims, “Well, the initial response is, you can say with racism and everything that goes on and then people are going to say, they are not going to hire us…”

Lenny, another middle-class man, also saw racism, and more specifically nepotism, as a key reason why unemployment is so high in black communities. He states, “I don’t know if it’s nepotism or what…most of the employers are white and hiring their own kinds. Lot of family owned businesses. It’s a number of reasons”.

In addition to the middle-class participants, working-class respondents also saw joblessness in the black community as a systemic problem. Alexuce, a working-class woman, also saw white nepotism as a link to black unemployment. Tommy, a working-class man from metro Atlanta, provided the same argument that Rea suggested. He claimed, “I know a lot of people who are felons, have felonies on their record, and that’s messed up in itself. Working for prison for free, that’s slavery.”. Raven is a 79-year-old working-class woman from Harlem, New York. She moved to Atlanta in the 1970s and continued to raise her two sons in the South. She also provided a systemic analysis for understanding unemployment in the black community:

Well, a lot of young black people that have prison experiences and many don’t have the current skills…For instance, if the young man who may not be good with his grammar, but knew how to hang sheet rock or pour concrete like our ancestors. I think a lot of the young people are not prepared academically or how to play the game.

Thelma shed light on the prison system and how they may not prepare young men with the skills needed to integrate back into normal society. However, she also made mention of education itself and how the school system does not adequately prepare young black people for employment.
6.1.2.2 Agency

While social structures such as the prison system, racism, and education contribute to joblessness among black people, other respondents across classes argue that agency and personal responsibility also play a role in unemployment. Although Rea made mention of the prison system, she also had this to say about people who are unemployed:

Prison, jail and opportunity and second chances is some of it. A large part of it. I think there are some that are lazy. And drugs shipped in our communities and significantly impacted people on drugs initially and lost their lives and babies born from that. You and I were born in this crack baby era, and those children are at a disadvantage. And education is different for some. But there is some laziness and trifling behavior, but I don’t think that’s everybody and you find that in other populations.

Rea brings up structural problems like a broken prison system, inadequate education, and the drug trade as significant reasons why unemployment is high in black communities. However, she also states that some people are “lazy” and “trifling”. Later, she argues that is only some of the unemployed population that depict this negative behavior.

Working-class respondents also felt that people need to take personal responsibility for the unemployment in their communities. Tommy also spoke of the prison system when addressing unemployment, and he made mention of lazy people who do not have jobs:

And then some people just don't want to work. Some of the neighbors I go to wake up every morning, drink a Bud Ice, smoke a blunt, and talk smack every day. Not really looking for a job, trying to get some income. And when you meet up with them face to face, man it's hard out here, can't find a job. Or, when you knock on their door at 3 in the afternoon, and they are sleep. Some guys are not looking and some it's really hard. They are really trying. It's hard for those with felonies. Real hard. That's my experience with the unemployed that I know.

Like Rea, Tommy recognized the systemic issues around policies and practices that make it difficult for people who have had felonies to get a job. However, he also spent time talking about how some people are lazy, and don’t want to work. In terms of unemployment, Tommy’s response has both agency and systemic references in it.
Alexuce, a working-class woman, stated earlier that nepotism played a role in unemployment. However, like our two previous respondents, she also argued for agency in her unemployment analysis:

If you don’t have your own store or business, then you can’t take chances like that [hiring your own family]. We don’t have much to help somebody out in. But if I’m a mechanic, I can hire my son and teach him what I know, then it can be a family business forever for generations and generations. But if you don’t have that kind of wealth, then you can’t really pass that down and pull a relative into it and fix that problem.

Alexuce’s analysis has both systemic and personal perspectives. While she claims that unemployment exists because many black people do not own stores and control the hiring in their own communities, the structural assessment comes when she makes mention of wealth. Black people have been denied access to schools, housing, and business opportunities that could have secured wealth for generations. This lack of wealth and ability to obtain initial capital for entrepreneurship can result in the lack of black-owned businesses that exist in predominately black areas.

6.1.3 Affirmative Action and Government Assistance

In the 1960s, The United States addressed the issue of racialized and gendered joblessness by passing federal Orders pressuring employers to uphold the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned discrimination in the workplace. This mandate gave many blacks the opportunity to secure, not only jobs, but admission into colleges and universities. This concept was known as Affirmative Action. While this move appeared to be a social and racial push forward, black and whites tend to have overlapping views of support and criticism related to the topic (Bobo 1998). Some blacks oppose affirmative action because they suffer from internalized racism and maintain racial resentment against their own racial group. Other blacks do not like the concept, and would prefer to believe that they received certain jobs, school admissions, or
opportunities based on their hard work and merit, as opposed to a federal mandate that forced a business or university to accept them. After interviewing thirty-four black Atlantans, I found that most participants responded in a similar way regardless of class. When asked if Affirmative Action was still necessary today, over twenty-eight of the thirty-four respondents argued that there is still a need for it. Although we live in a post-Civil Rights society, where many people feel that race is no longer an issue, many blacks still claim that whites should need pressure to give people of color a chance in the workforce or educational setting. Some argued that if not for this federal mandate, whites would discriminate against blacks and other people of color, by hiring whites at a disproportionate number than people of color.

In addition to Affirmative Action, over thirty of the thirty-four respondents across gender and class lines shared similar views on government assistance. While the U.S. put government assistance in place to ensure that the government was meeting the basic needs of poor people in this country, media outlets and politicians have racialized and gendered the poor and recipients of government assistance (Collins 2004). Although there are more white people on government assistance than blacks, the face of welfare is often a minority, specifically a poor woman of color. The notion of the welfare queen was popularized in the 1970s, as politicians and media personnel began to accuse black women of “taking advantage of the system” and getting rich off the government. In the 1990s and 2000s, legislatures began to support policies that would place stricter regulations on the government assistance provided to the poor (Blank 2003), while also delivering government assistance in the form of bailouts to larger corporations. In this study, I asked participants their perceptions on people who receive government assistance. Over thirty respondents across class and gender lines stated that it should be used as a way of getting out of poverty; and people should not take advantage of the system or depend on “welfare”. However,
they agreed that if a person needs to receive government assistance, then they should use it and it should be available for them.

6.1.4 Law Enforcement

The last major larger racial issue that I examined in this section of my research was perceptions about the police. Similar to Affirmative Action and government assistance, a majority of blacks across classes reported uneasy feelings about law enforcement. While there were a few respondents that claimed some black people engage in behavior that require police officers to use force, a large number of participants reported mistrust towards the police and the “justice” system as a whole, and see some of their behavior as aggressive, inappropriate and dangerous.

6.2 Perceptions of the Black Working Class

The black community and blackness itself is not one fixed reality that people understand on a linear scale, but a set of projects that must scholars must explore over time (Patillo 2008). Part of the complexity of blackness are the ethnicities, groups and sub groups that make up the larger race and the way in which we negotiate our intraracial interaction with other groups. The larger concept of boundary-work can help researchers understand the separation between races, ethnicities, and classes. Michele Lamont uses boundary work to “designate the process by which people differentiate themselves from others” (Lamont 2002:270). In her book, the Dignity of Working Men, she explores the ways working-class black and white men in the U.S. and France create identity boundaries that break down and erect racial and class divisions. I focus on two of her boundary-making theories, the “people below” and the “people above,” which she uses to explain the intraracial class relationships within the black community. Lamont suggests that the black working class can sometimes participate in their own self-deprecation, as many black workers find no romantic appeal in their own positions (Lamont 2002 p. 119) largely due to the
lack of education, resources and contacts that are available to them. The American Dream becomes a mythic notion that is difficult to achieve, and they are more likely to support economic redistribution, which can explain their collectivist outlook.

In contrast, black workers’ perspective of lower class can limit racial solidarity if they continue to see disadvantaged blacks as “no-good niggers” and people with no morals, plans or hopes (Lamont 2002). Even though there is a belief in differences of morality between the two classes, the class boundaries the working class creates between themselves and the “lower class” has less to do with moral outlook and more for practical purposes. Many working-class blacks seek to protect their resources and the vulnerable position that exists between themselves and the underclass (Lamont 2002). Dangers associated with black poverty, like the availability of drugs, is a concern for working-class blacks and can explain why they maintain clear boundaries between the “mainstream” and the “non mainstream”. Many of the respondents understand that a few bad breaks can result in a working-class member slipping into the disadvantaged category. Therefore, their collectivist outlook and belief in giving back to the community can inhibit their upward mobility. Blacks respond that their friends, family and community can put enormous responsibility on them financially and can inhibit their ability to “move up in the world”. While working-class blacks identify themselves more with the upper class than the “people below,” and believe in emulating values like ambition, they also argue that people should not respect middle-class behaviors like selfishness.

Similar to my research hypothesis, Michele Lamont finds that the boundary-making practices that exist between working and middle-class blacks can inhibit racial unity. Working-class black men find value in middle-class blacks, but despise their behaviors. In addition, they seek a responsibility to the disadvantaged, while also seeing some as economic burdens that can
compromise their already precarious class position and lead them towards downward mobility. In my research, I expand on these ideas by exploring intraracial boundary-making strategies among both black men and women.

Based on my interview data, blacks across classes see working-class blacks people as individuals raised in a single-parent household. They have hourly-wage jobs, as opposed to middle-class blacks who often have jobs with a salary. One job usually does not bring in enough resources to provide a decent life for the family, so the parent (usually the mom) works two jobs. Additional amenities like vacations, educational enrichment programs, cars and other material symbols of middle-class status rarely exists in the lives of the working class. Usually, they have a low safety net, so one or two setbacks may wipe out their whole savings. Dads are involved in raising the children, but they may not live in the home with the mother and child. Apartments are often associated with a working-class family, as most of the participants who described their past or current economic status as working class, were typically living in an apartment during those times. In fact, the level of poverty one experienced could be determined by how many rooms one had in their apartment. Lenny describes his poor upbringing this way:

[We were] middle-class poor. Cause she [mom] worked every day and we enjoyed every holiday and some people in our neighborhood couldn’t and we grew up in these apartments and they were two bedrooms and one bedrooms. And the ones that lived in the two bedrooms, they was like “oo yall must have money”. I was like my mama is poor. She just go to work every day. People made us feel like we were middle-class poor. But we were poor.

Although Lamont’s (2002) research showed that working-class blacks were more likely to identify with the “people above” than the “people below,” participants like Lenny are quick to bring up their modest beginnings and appeal to hold fast to the identity of the poor/working class. Many of them want to remind others that they were not born with a “silver spoon” and identify with the “people below”.

Respondents across classes view working-class neighborhoods as negative social environments that yield anger and frustration. The disadvantaged group usually lives in crime-plagued working-class neighborhoods. Kelsey, a woman who experienced both life as middle class and working poor in Atlanta, explains her time in poverty this way:

And you don’t know where your next meal is coming from. You don’t know if the light bill is going to be paid. You can’t have new clothing. You go from having a certain kind of clothes and shoes to trying to figure it out from day to day. And you become angry. You become defensive. You are having arguments with your classmates about, you wear this all the time.

While participants perceive working-class neighborhoods as places that are full of antagonism, it is also a location for parties and unwanted noise. Alma is in her mid-30s and is a middle-class black woman who grew up in a working-class family in Mississippi. She currently works as a nurse, and lives comfortably in an Atlanta suburb. However, she recalls what it was like to live in a working-class neighborhood:

I just don’t wanna be in a environment where there’s a party scene and I know that with my family personally, my family they party people. So I think about being in a community with all of my family. I don’t think I would get rest. [Lol] No seriously and that’s what I’m thinking. It would be a party every weekend. So that’s why I say diversity is good. And I’m not tryna say black people party all the time, because I’m black and I don’t party all the time. But I think diversity is good.

It is important to note that a substantial amount of the participants that grew up poor or working class came from homes where the mother and father did not live in the same household. Moreover, several scenarios surfaced where participants lived middle class, but because of a divorce or spousal separation, they experienced downward mobility. In most cases, fathers were still involved in the raising of the children and there were no signs of extreme family dysfunction; however, my research suggests that two-parent family units are important in black communities, not only in the emotional sense, but it also helps to create and solidify economic mobility and middle-class status. The precarious financial status of many working and middle-
class blacks makes them much more vulnerable than whites to downward mobility upon divorce or spousal separation.

My study also shows that black people usually prefer to socialize first with black people in their perceived class and then later with blacks outside of their perceived class. Middle-class blacks presume that they may not be able to hold the same kinds of conversations with working-class blacks as they can with more economically advantaged blacks. In addition, some middle-class blacks feel like the culture for working-class blacks may not be consistent with their values and/or principles. Kelsey is a 43-year-old middle-class doctor who was born and raised in metro Atlanta and she had this to say about conversations and interacting with blacks in terms of class:

First of all, I hate small talk. But if I’m going to have to be in an environment where there’s small talk, then you need to have something that’s substantial. So, I work in a certain industry, and so that tends to lend itself to more middle-class folks who are talking about politics or healthcare or whatever, and those are things that — and it passes my time.

Kelsey believes that middle-class people will be well versed on topics that she is willing to discuss in a social setting. These topics are substantial and based on her interests and occupation, which is largely related to class. She claims it would be better for her to converse with middle-class people who share similar experiences and knowledge about certain subject matters than working-class people who may not share the same interests. Lisa, a middle-class Atlanta transplant from Florida who grew up poor, shared similar sentiments about the working-class.

I would feel comfortable with the black middle class, because the lower class, I don’t have stuff in common with them. When I think of lower class, I think of people who listen to hip-hop and they curse. Not saying that all of them, but a lot of them, they curse in everyday language and the way they carry themselves. I’m different. I probably wouldn’t have that much to say, so I’d probably be quiet.
It appears that Lisa and Kelsey grew up working class and/or poor and have now achieved middle-class status. Similar to Lamont’s (2002) findings about working-class blacks finding value in middle-class blacks, these first-generation middle-class blacks share the same sentiment and find themselves benefitting more from interacting with the black middle class than the black working class. Lisa distances herself from the working-class or poor blacks by othering them. She claims she is different from them and does not practice certain lower class cultural norms like listening to hip-hop and cursing. Although she does not explicitly say so, the implication is that she has a negative response to these actions. The interesting point about this analysis is that one of the larger markets for hip-hop music is middle-class suburban white kids. This demographic consumes the hip-hop music that has cursing in it so, Lisa’s perception of the relationship between class and culture is opposite to the reality. However, this identity that she has constructed and negotiated keeps her from maintaining stronger interactions with working-class black folks in this way.

One participant’s relationship with the working class was a little more fluid and less absolute than the others. While Jermaine claims he once identified with the black working class, he argues that they have adopted ideas and practices that are no longer In line with his standards:

> Lower income African Americans would be my preferred groups because that’s what I feel I am more than anything else. But they have and it feels weird saying this. But they have embraced a culture that I can’t deal with it anymore. There is no thought or appreciation. No intellect is looked at as something. And I don’t wanna be that dude that can party with folk, then go live somewhere else. And it didn’t’ use to be that way. We all use to have the same values. I don’t know how it changed.

Jermaine is a native of Atlanta and considers himself working class, even though by definition he is middle class. Similar to Lamont’s findings, Jermaine is a self-proclaimed working-class black person who believes the working-class and poor black folks reject intellect, thought or appreciation. Like Lisa, he has othered himself from this culture, even though he seems to be a
bit more troubled about it. He desires to be around the class group with which he identifies, and
does not want to appear a sell-out (partying with the folks, but living somewhere else). Jermaine
seems to have a sincere love and appreciation for his people, but he applies certain defects in
behavior to working-class poor black culture, which has caused him to separate himself from
them. He remembers a time where values and principles were universal across class groups
within the black community, but believes things have changed.

6.2.1 Working-Class Progressives

Many respondents claim that Atlanta consists of individuals who perform class. They
argue that they have witnessed several people living outside of their means or pretending to live
in a higher class than their resources will allow. With so many people “playing middle class”
and forcing themselves to live the lifestyle, it is difficult to determine which ones can afford the
middle-class status they claim or live. I talk about this in more detail later. However, this is
necessary to mention now because, while many respondents claimed that people in Atlanta like
to pretend that they live in an economic class higher than what their resources will allow, my
research shows that many middle-class participants were more likely to identify with a class
lower than their actual status. Therefore, many upper middle-class participants viewed
themselves as middle or working-class and many middle-class respondents self-identified as
working class. Kelsey is a 43-year-old middle-class single mom who is a doctor and makes
$140,000/year. However, she still viewed herself as working class. She claimed she was
working class because she works hard. Later, she admitted that she has a middle-class salary but
a working-class mentality. When asked why she self-identified this way, she explained:

People give these ranges, and I’m like where do y’all get these ranges from, as far as, oh
if you make this much money it’s real good, you doing real good. You know, if you hit
six figures you’re – no, because you graduate with an amount of debt that puts you
behind the eight ball before you even get started. And so that’s why I say that…. And so
probably if, you know Sallie Mae wasn’t my girlfriend and harassing me and mad because I don’t text her back quickly, then I might feel differently about that. But the amount of school debt I had to incur so that I don’t live like that or go back to that poverty, then I feel like I’m still behind the eight ball. So, you see one thing on paper, but I don’t feel like I make that amount even though I really do.

While many middle-class blacks recognize that they may be more advantaged than their poor or working-class counterparts, the amount of work they have to do to achieve and maintain middle-class status and the debt they incur along the way makes many of them feel like they are working just as hard as their disadvantaged brothers and sisters. Forced to work long hours, pay off loans, and take care of other members of the family can be a burden for the black middle class. Lisa, a middle-class Atlanta transplant from Florida, states:

I never thought me and my husband would be in the six digits and when they [assuming accountant] said we were in the six digits, then I’m like well where in the world did my money go. Whatever. My tax people said, this how much money we made, why we don’t feel it? You can be middle class but feel like you’re working class…Working class is like pay check to pay check I guess. So with us it could be pay check to paycheck but not quite….We are working class in progress. There we go. [laughs]. Working-class progressives.

Lisa created a new term, working-class progressives, to describe some people in the black middle class. These working-class progressives are people who may appear middle class by definition, but they lack the social safety net, savings and wealth accumulation to ensure their middle class status over time. Whites are more likely to achieve middle-class status with an economic safety net and a wealth of familial and financial support that can offset school costs and housing debt (Shapiro 2003) that has often kept the black middle class from enjoying their middle-class status to the same degree as their white counterparts. This reality can also be the reason why middle-class blacks are more likely to connect to the disadvantaged within their racial group than whites (Lamont 2002), largely because their realities are much more similar across classes than whites.
This additional barrier can be the reason why many middle-class blacks feel they work as hard as poor blacks and are not as sympathetic to them when it comes to receiving government assistance or assistance from higher-class blacks. When asked how they felt about the government and advantaged blacks helping poor blacks, some participants concluded that they work hard, and the poorer members of their same community should get up and work just as hard as they do. Still, it is important to note that most middle-class blacks felt that working-class and poorer blacks should receive assistance as long as they are not abusing these “benefits”. In addition, they also felt it is important to support and help people in their community. Alexuçe’s response to the working class receiving government assistance is a great example of these sentiments:

I feel like some people can be better because I came from the same house and roads as you. Things weren’t blocked off for you. You could’ve done the same thing. But I guess it’s necessary. You still sometimes have to help somebody up. So I’m okay for that.

Similar to what Lamont found with the working-class blacks, some working and middle-class blacks are protective of their resources and do not want to risk downward mobility by consistently helping the more disadvantaged blacks. To justify this, they may construct an argument related to personal responsibility/agency and see them as people who are in their current position because they did not work hard or desire to do better like their middle-class counterparts. I go into more detail about this later as I discuss the black middle class and the issues that are unique to them.

6.3 Perceptions of the black middle class

In the previous section, I analyzed interviews within the boundary framework of “the people below”. However, in this section I employ her concept of the “people above” to help explain perceptions of the black middle class (Lamont 2002). While black workers vary in their
performance of boundary work, these worlds can overlap along class lines. Regardless of race, blue-collar workers identify with values that are associated with the middle class, yet are critical of middle-class behaviors. Like whites, many blacks measure success based on increased income and ambition. Black workers find a larger appreciation for money than whites and are more likely to use it as a definition for success, perhaps due to the belief that it can be a way of trumping the racial stigma in U.S. society (Lamont 2002). Black folks don’t see money as a way of oppressing a lower group, but a tool to help overcome the disadvantage attached to their skin color. Working-class blacks see the people with this tool as added value to the community and praise them for specific middle-class values such as goal orientation, ambition and leadership (Lamont 2002). Black workers place a greater emphasis on leadership than whites, which could also explain why the black community can see it as a requirement for black social movements. The black respondents in Lamont’s study see leadership as an important value used to keep drugs at bay and some look to the middle-class educated population as leaders.

According to Lamont (2002), the racial equalizer for black people is money, but working-class blacks also describe the “people above” as being immoral and selfish with their resources. Overall, blacks have a more negative view of power and authority than whites. This perception can be the result of the racist experiences blacks have which makes them less likely than whites to equate upward mobility with advanced morality. Lamont (2002) finds that black workers draw fewer boundaries against the advantaged class than whites; however, the boundaries that blacks do draw are much stronger than the ones erected by whites. Many times, the notion of white and middle class would cross as black workers saw them as synonymous. Both are perceived to be domineering, exploitative, and selfish. Lamont finds that the social boundaries drawn by blacks against whites can exist in their negotiation with other blacks. White workers correlate
poor and black as synonymous, thus providing a racialized component to the class divisions exhibited by working-class blacks. Perspectives of morality are a key difference between working-class and middle-class blacks (Lamont 2002).

Some of the same boundary negotiations found in Lamont’s work occur in my findings. Participants in this study usually described the black middle class as a person living in a two-parent family home where everyone lives in the same house, has access to two or more cars, and may have extra money to go on vacation or spend on nice amenities. Education is a measure of class, and college educated kids are an example of middle-class living. Della claims that she grew up middle class because both her parents had PhDs. Even something that should be as universal as health insurance is a symbol of middle-class status. Whiteness is also the canon for middle class. When asked what comes to her mind when she thinks about the black middle class, Kennyshia, a 23-year-old graduate student in metro Atlanta states:

My aunt. She lives in a predominately white neighborhood. Drives a nice car like what white people do. If they live in a predominately-white neighborhood and their kid goes to a predominately-white school, then most likely they are middle-high range.

Even in Atlanta where there is a prominent and bustling black middle class, blacks still equate middle class with how close in proximity one is to white people and whiteness. This is particularly evident in schools. Participants see middle-class schools as having the better education and access to resources, regardless of the racial make-up of the school. They see black schools as still poor or underperforming, and white schools as a place of higher achievement. Although Atlanta has predominately black schools with a high concentration of students from middle-class, professional families, some black Atlantans do not prefer those schools, or simply don’t know they exist. Christina has been living in metro Atlanta for the past eleven years, yet she had this to say about schools “I’ve never seen a predominately middle-class black school in
my life”. She stated this, even though there was one that was located less than five miles from her house. Lamont found in her study that New York’s black working class saw white and middle class as interchangeable. So, even in the “Black Mecca,” whiteness can also sometimes still be the standard for middle-class status in our society. However, it is important to note that about half of the blacks across classes that addressed the education question regarding the preferred race and class of their child’s school, reported that if given the opportunity, they would send their child to a middle-class black school over a middle-class white school. One respondent stated, this was because their child would get access to a better education from the class status in addition to the cultural identity from being in a predominately-black school. Approximately, the other half felt that a middle-class white school would provide their child with the educational resources and access to compete with other students. In short, a white middle-class school would provide the best education for their black child.

Lamont found that the black working class admired black middle-class principles such as goal orientation, ambition and leadership; while also criticizing them for being selfish and authoritarian. In my interviews, many people across class groups see the black middle class in the same way. Some participants see them as stuck up, arrogant, classist, and to use a more popular term, bougie. Organizations like Links and Jack and Jill are often seen as hallmarks for black middle-class status and can be utilized as a way to expand career and social networks. Parents desire to place their kids in certain black socialite groups such as these. However, other middle-class black parents prefer to ignore them completely based on the descriptions about the black middle class. Christina, a middle-class mother, said:

Fuck Jack and Jill. Those are some real snobby ass black women for no reason….We’re all in the same struggle…I’m considering joining The Links down here. I don’t know if I can do it. Same reason.
Some blacks view these predominant middle-class spaces that often mirror high-class white elite spaces, as snobbish and deplorable. However, other participants see the growth in these groups and the various nuances that may exist regionally and within certain chapters. Rea described a certain experience in Jack and Jill:

I know for a fact a family friend, single woman, was in Jack and Jill and there was a lot of, should she be there? You know single mother. It was a thought. But they did let her in and she could afford it and her kids went through it and whatever. In Atlanta, I think you can find single women in Jack and Jill, but I think there’s more I think that experience of should we? It probably would’ve been on 10 here…. Their are definitely some women who are single women, more contemporary, but this would’ve been back in the 80s and I just feel like 80s Atlanta, probably not. Now a days, it’s probably not as crazy, but I think even the finances or job, it’s like what do you do? You need to measure up to this certain level.

Rea admits that to be a part of some high society black groups, particularly in Atlanta, a person must measure up to a certain standard. At one point in time, a single black woman with children may not have met the standards set for such a group. However, times have changed and while their still may be some resistance, some of these black socialite groups have accepted more non-traditional people as members.

Women were not the only people to critique the black middle class. Lenny, a middle-class black man, states:

I don’t know if middle-class black people understand the poor black plight more than the middle-class white person. Cause I get tired of them walking up and down the street. I’m glad they getting rid of that damn Pine Street. [Lol] I want my property value to go up. That’s my reason.

Lenny comes from a poor/working-class background and lives a middle-class life, largely due to the salary of his husband. He admits that he is in favor of tearing down the nearby homeless shelter in downtown Atlanta so that his property value can increase. He recognizes that there is a clear distinction in the realities and experiences between the black middle and working class; one that the advantage group often ignores and overlooks. He has given in to that reality and
confesses to not understanding or being sympathetic to the black plight, even though he was there a few decades ago.

While Lenny has embraced his middle-class identity, he often despises socializing with his husband’s elite group. Lenny is a stay-at-home father and his husband is the primary breadwinner. His husband’s job allows him to have access to elite circles of influence in the city. However, he finds himself uncomfortable in these spaces. When talking about being around middle-class people, he states, “Sometimes I don’t feel comfortable around middle-class people. I walk into a room and I’m like “ughh not these people again”. When asked about being middle class in Atlanta, he also claims:

I am who I am and I grew up poor in the hood. I don’t try to hide it. Sometimes I do but it don’t last long. The true me comes out. Fake it to fit in to the middle class but at some point, I’m just a down home brother. It’s hard sometimes putting on airs. You have to. Especially running in circles with [my husband].

Lenny does not prefer to be around middle-class blacks in Atlanta, and he also finds that there is diversity in the kinds of middle-class blacks that he encounters. According to Lenny, certain middle-class blacks are more tolerable than others. He states, “Most middle-class blacks are actually down to earth, but the ones that come from money are the ones that are different”.

While Lenny perceived that there are behavioral differences between first generation middle-class and generationally advantaged blacks, there is a common feeling across class groups. Some participants felt that while you have more economically advantaged blacks aiding those in need, overall many middle-class blacks have forgotten where they come from and are not doing enough to help the more disadvantaged population in our communities.

While some participants think middle-class blacks are bougie, other respondents still hold fast to Du Bois’ talented tenth philosophy and contend that the more educated and academically privileged subset of the black race will be the ones to lead our people into
liberation. Giselle states: “[the] black middle class is the future…” Other participants conclude that middle-class culture is much more refined and signifies a desire to want more out of life. Lisa claims, “with the middle class you’re striving to be better. You have a little bit more class…”

Most middle-class people who live in diverse middle-class neighborhoods and meet all the criteria of being middle class (college educated, middle-income bracket and professional occupation) prefer to socialize with the black middle class at parties and they also prefer to send their kids to middle-class white schools. The belief is that they have the better education and will equip their kids with what is necessary to be successful. The working-class, or middle-class black participants that live among and spend time around working-class black people were more likely to desire socializing with working-class black people and/or send their children to a working-class black school. I explore these choices in more detail in the next section.

6.4 Negotiating boundaries between classes

Middle-class blacks are generally more likely to live among working-class blacks than middle-class whites are to live among working-class whites (Patillo 1999). There is scant research on the color of middle-class residential spaces and its relation to blackness and is worth exploring when assessing the ways in which black middle and working-class Atlantans negotiate and understand race and class in the “Black Mecca”. While the black middle class live in these areas, many of them are still near working-class black neighborhoods, communities and schools.

Atlanta is a city where in many cases, the working class, poor and middle class can live among each other. Historically, this proximity helped to create a sense of community among blacks Atlantans across class. At the same time, middle-class, working-class and poor blacks still maintain and negotiate certain cultural boundaries that people understand and practice within
their interaction. Jermaine remembers a time when black Atlanta had a sense of community and people could depend on each other. When asked about how common it was to see black-owned businesses growing up, Jermaine, an Atlanta native and resident of predominately black southwest Atlanta states:

Jermaine: It was so common place that I didn’t know how powerful it was until later. I could own a shop. I could be a doctor or a construction worker or be a plumber or a lawyer. Mr. Johnson was a lawyer. That was powerful. Looking back then it’s like wow that’s powerful that’s how it is. Now, I look back like that was something.

Interviewer: Was it common to see different people in class groups living in the same neighborhood? Like when you say Mr. Johnson was a lawyer, was he a lawyer in a predominately black middle-class neighborhood or did he live in the neighborhood with the working class?

Jermaine: Oh got you. Naw, there were clear boundaries. If that’s your question, we don’t have em now, but we had housing projects, like serious ones when I was growing up. So unfortunately, there were clear boundaries. I guess I would call them working class. My neighborhood was working class/middle class boundaries at the time. Um, and right down street was Bankhead courts, a rough housing project. I doubt if the Bankhead kids got to see any of that. Because the leaders weren’t in there neighborhood. They weren’t coming to talk to them and I only know that because when I got to high school, we were all fed to the same high school. There was no separation of high schools at the time. Of course, you had private schools where the really affluent people in Adamsville went to like Woodward Academy or somewhere, but regular working and middle-class people went to school with regular project low-income” people. So that’s when I would start to see when the line was drawn even but yeah that was a clear line.

Interviewer: And the line was between working class poor/middle class/ and affluent middle class?

Jermaine: Naw it was the two against the one. It was the working class affluent against the poor and lower class yeah.

While middle-class, working-class and poor blacks lived very close to each other, they still negotiated boundary and residential lines and kept the three groups separate from each other. Even the city leaders and influential black people in the community made sure their visits stayed in the more affluent areas. Influential leaders and institutions geared inspiration towards the already advantaged and somewhat advantaged black children in the middle and working-class
areas. Low-income people that lived less than a mile or two away were not privy to many of these visits and the access to the “black excellence” that the other families were able to experience.

According to Karyn Lacy (2007), middle-class blacks use class-based identities to create boundaries between middle-class and lower-class blacks. In her exploration of identity and the black middle class in Washington D.C., Karyn Lacy (2007) finds the black middle class employing ways to let whites know that while they share certain commonalities with black people (institutions, cultural identity, etc), they are more “refined” than their working-class counterparts. For many people, they used this to gain white acceptance. She characterizes this action as social differentiation, which is a way for middle-class blacks to use public identity as a signal to whites that they are not like “those poor black people”. This attempt to make their middle-class status known to others can be the result of the extra effort it takes African Americans to reach and maintain middle-class status; a struggle that many middle-class whites take for granted (Lacy 2007). The elite middle class believes their choice of residence is a significant class marker and it is boundary-work that reinforces their social category. In addition, the elite blacks believed that the reprehensible bad behavior of the lower-class blacks were another point of separation. It is a reminder to the rest of the blacks that there is a distinction in the actions and behavior between the two groups. Separating themselves from their working-class counterparts and racial stereotypes may have tangible results like higher work credentials.

Jameka, a middle-class instructor at a local University is an example of one who practices this social differentiation described in Lacy’s work:

I live in some really nice townhouses, but I go on MLK, and it’s desolate. I see boarded up houses and really poverty at its worst. It’s literally two minutes away. I could walk to
MLK, right? But where I live, I’m kind of in a bubble. I don’t see it, right? And if I don’t want to see it, I don’t have to see it….But the flipside about that is that it’s like we’re so close to the poverty. I can see it, but if you don’t have to see it, you don’t have to see it….But that’s when I was like, oh shit where do I live? And then I find myself trying to justify where I live…oh I live off of HE Homes….And I’m like, no, no, no, no I live near the Cascade area. I live across from the MARTA Station, and they’re like, “oh okay”.

I almost have to justify where I live because I’m like, I literally live two seconds away from poverty even though I’m not in poverty. I’m not, you know, thank the Lord I’m privileged enough to live in a middle-class area, and my neighbors are middle class, and doctors I’ve seen, I’ve seen professors, I’ve seen working class people. So I’m thankful that we live in a little middle-class bubble, but we are literally around the corner from the hood. A few times we’ve heard gunshots, and the first thing we said, oh it’s off of MLK. We’re so close, but we’re so far apart at the same time. There’s no connection in that community. We got to live in our little bubble, and if we never have to see it we don’t have to. Again, a good and bad side of Atlanta. While you do have those prominent black people in Atlanta, there’s no connection between the middle class and the poor class, which I find very interesting. And even when I got off MLK because I was going on Cascade, there’s this J.R. Crickets on Cascade that me and my partner go to a lot. And in order to get there it’s quicker for us to take the neighborhood, so we take the neighborhoods in.

Completely different when you go in the neighborhoods. I turned down MLK, turned down this side road and turned down another side road, and before I know it there’s these big huge houses. So, it’s confusing because it’s like we all live together literally in like the same three-mile radius, but it’s completely different because even those houses are huge. They’re above my tax bracket. So over here like, okay this is interesting. How is this – what’s going on here? So it’s really interesting seeing how black people can literally live in the same area and be in completely different socioeconomic statuses.

While Jameka does not use social differentiation to prove to whites that she is not like those kinds of black folks, instead she appears to use it to prove to other blacks that she is not of the same class, category, or neighborhood as her working-class counterparts. As stated previously, place of residence was a point of separation and class marker for her and she uses it to justify where she lives and specify her class status. Jameka sees the class boundaries that people negotiate and erect in the city of Atlanta. Even though she teaches black students their history and culture at the local University, and is a freedom fighter in her own right, she admits
that she is also a victim of the class boundaries that blacks create in the “Black Mecca”. When I asked Jameka if she feels connected to the black community, she later admits:

Yeah, but of course that’s the nature of teaching at an HBCU….Now, do I feel connected to the people who live on the MLK? No. Which is really interesting because I feel connected to the black culture and the black community in a very academic way, but maybe not in the more practical way…like when I go to MLK – I keep bringing that example. I don’t feel uncomfortable. I’m just like that’s interesting, okay. I see some stuff that I’m like, people do that? Who wears that? What are you doing? Why is that child hollering? My middle-class value system definitely, you know, sirens going off that there’s politics of respectability and that sort of thing. Even though [the] black middle class try to get away from that politics and respectability, we definitely perpetuate it in so many different ways.

Jameka’s connection to and comfortability with the black community is classed. She feels connected to the “safe” black middle-class segment of the community while at work or in professional academic spaces. However, there is a disconnect when she returns to her surrounding neighborhoods and interact with the more poor or working-class black folks in the city. Jameka admits when hearing gunshots, she automatically assumes that it is coming from the poor black neighborhoods, even though middle-class blacks live around her. This assumption that poor and working-class blacks are the purveyors of violence is a characteristic that many people have internalized, even though there is no research that shows poor blacks are more violent than middle-class blacks or whites. In addition, two-thirds of black men are in prison for non-violent drug offenses (Alexander 2010). Therefore, there is no reason to assume that gunshots are coming from poor and working-class blacks. However, many black people easily fall prey to these negative stereotypes that society applies to our people.

In addition to negative assumptions, Jameka also finds herself trying to validate her place of existence. Even though she lives close to the “hood,” she makes sure that she names her exact location and neighborhood so that listeners know that she lives near the black poor, but not with the black poor. She finds herself validating her place of residence so that people don’t confuse
her and think that she is one of the disadvantaged blacks. She would rather explain to people that she lives near the H.E. Holmes area on the side of Cascade (which is the black middle and upper-class area) as opposed to the other side of H.E. Holmes where the poor and working-class blacks reside. This over justification of residence shows that many middle-class blacks do not mind living close to poor and working-class blacks, but they erect verbal and geographical boundary lines to ensure that people do not mistake them for the disadvantaged and may assume that they embody the characteristics and culture of the people in that area.

What makes class so unique and even more nuanced is that class identity and experiences can be different even within family structures, and one’s history of social mobility. While Jameka admits that as one who grew up middle class, she sometimes does not feel connected to her working-class neighbors, her partner, who grew up in “the hood” feels the opposite:

You know, so I think in that way she definitely feels more connected to the community. And because of how she grew up. She always tells me, your little suburban upbringing. Yes, I came up from the suburbs. I’m not even going to lie. I grew up in the suburbs…I call her tales from the hood because she always has this story of this – well, when I was growing up we had to share a radio. When I was growing up we had the candy man and the candy lady in the neighborhood, and I’m just like, oh my God, here we go. I call her tales from the hood. She might feel more connected because of where she came from, but even she is disconnected because she has adopted middle-class values because of her education. But when she goes home she probably has – she’s one of the few people that has a degree, but she feels connected to home. She feels like, I can go home and be myself. I think for me I do feel connected to my community. I understand it intellectually, and that’s my connection, but I don’t necessarily feel it in an everyday daily basis. It might not be all the way that connection on a personal level. Yeah.

6.4.1 Interactions within class groups

In assessing interaction and identity work within and across class groups, my research does not show a difference in the negotiating practices among specific classes, genders, or places of nativity. Participants across all social location negotiate identities and interaction in various ways. In my research, I examined participants’ preferred interaction with people in social/party,
educational and neighborhood settings. Some respondents preferred to interact with individuals within their own class groups in most or all social spaces, while others preferred to interact with people outside of their class group.

Carver, a middle-class man, stated that he would rather be at a party with middle class blacks because “I think the middle-class blacks I have more in common with them on a professional level. Mix and mingle and share with and ideas to collaborate”. Many middle-class blacks see middle-class social settings as an opportunity to further their career or goals, while building networks. Danny, a middle-class Atlanta native also notices how middle-class blacks utilize social settings to advance their careers; however, this strategy is a reason why he prefers not to interact with them in a social setting:

I’m definitely going to be annoyed to go to the bougie black [party]…That’s the worst one for me. It’s going to be a headache. I’m not going to feel like sitting in there with the blah, blah, blah. “What do you do”? “Oh. Ah. Wow”. And I always get them. I say I work at [place of employment]. And then I wait. “What do you do at [place of employment]”? “I’m the [position at job]”. “Oh, you’re the (position at job)…”. And it’s funny, middle-class whites and blacks both try to position you. …middle-class networking, it drives my husband crazy…Like, the difference is the black middle class are going to need you to help them tomorrow. Right? Like my thousands just went missing, now I ain’t got no money. Can you call somebody? The white middle class are going to store it away, in case they need it. Right? They going to come. They going to ask too, possibly. But it’s not going to be right then. And it’s going to be something like, my child is there and they want to switch from one thing to sociology. And I want you to really talk to them about going to college. Black middle class is like my child wants to go to (a university), whatever, I can’t afford it. Right?

Danny recognizes the flaws of socializing in middle class-spaces across racial groups. He sometimes feels that people will use his position to try and get ahead. He prefers to socialize with working-class people, so that he does not have the pressure of having to state his position, or deal with people changing the way they treat him because of his position. In a working-class social setting, he can just be himself.
Lisa grew up poor and is currently middle class. However, she prefers to socialize with middle-class people.

Middle class. You’re striving to be better, you have a little bit more class, um so that’s me. Not saying that I can’t talk to them, cause I will. Cause I [have] people in my family.

Most respondents across classes state that they have family members who are working class, and use that as a reason as to why they are not foreign to working-class/poor behavior or settings. However, some of those same respondents are currently middle class and prefer to socialize in those settings. Lisa argues that there are cultural, behavioral differences between herself and the black working class, and therefore she prefers middle-class spaces. She associates the black working class with negative behavior, and the black middle class with advancement.

In addition to social/party settings, some blacks prefer to send their kids to middle-class schools regardless of the racial make-up of the school. Rea, a middle-class woman, said she prefers sending her child to a middle-class black school, than a middle-class white school because:

You need to have access [to] resources and go to a school and hopefully has a high ranking. So, when I want you to go to Spelman it would translate. So, I would probably stay with a middle-class or upper middle-class group that would ideally influence what the education looks like.

Rea concludes that schools with a majority middle-class population will likely have the resources necessary to ensure that her child is prepared academically for the college she/he will attend—which is Spelman. Middle-class blacks are not the only people to prefer educational settings that are consistent with their social class. Tommy, a working-class black male, preferred to send his child to a working-class black school, even though it was clear to him that the opportunities were not available at the schools that were more associated with his race and class.
6.4.2 Interactions across class groups

Middle-class blacks attempt to prepare their children for the white world, while maintaining ties to the black community. Black spaces are an important site for constructing black identity and often places where middle-class blacks can be “who they are”. Neckerman, Carter and Lee (1999) label this strategy of maintaining ties to the black community while preparing their children for the white world, the “minority culture of mobility,” which is a tactic used by middle-class blacks to cope with the stress of dealing with white folk. Both elite upper-class and core middle-class blacks see significance in cultural identity. Through this relationship, they reconnect with the larger black community. Middle-class blacks may adopt the hip-hop street culture of lower-class blacks to legitimize their blackness. Patillo (1999) refers to this as the “ghetto trance”. In my study, many blacks preferred to interact with people within their class group, however, there were some who enjoyed interacting with people outside of their class group. Those middle-class blacks who preferred to be with people outside of their class group find value in black spaces, exhibit this minority culture of mobility, and use “ghetto trance” language to stay connected to their racial identity. Giselle, a middle-class nurse from Florida, self identifies as sophistaratchet and would prefer to party or socialize with working-class black people.

I would feel most comfortable with down home black people. I’m what they call sophistaratchet. I’m very sip your tea with your pinky up. Sit up straight. I like dressing up and being cute, but I also like 444 and knuck if you buck. But I know how to run a board meeting too. I would be very comfortable.

Ratchet is a term that can be synonymous with the phrase “ghetto”, actions that resemble the cultural traits, behaviors, and survival tactics of the more disadvantaged black population. However, she ties her sophistication to her ability to “sip tea,” “sit up straight,” “dressing up,” “being cute,” and “run a board meeting”. Sophistaratchet is being able to embody two
juxtaposed identities and seamlessly move between them without compromising one’s racial identity. Giselle acknowledges that she enjoys working-class black culture and music; however, she prides herself on knowing how to code switch and perform middle-class duties such as running a board meeting or sipping tea. Monique, a middle-class woman, also creates a name to describe her identity and preference to socialize with people outside of her class group.

So, you know I don’t consider myself working-class black. I would hang out with working-class black before anything else cause they just some extra regular down to earth folks. Aint nobody finna bother nobody. I’m probably finna get me a fish plate, chicken plate, a cold beer. I can talk trash about whatever it is I wanna talk about and just be extra regular.

Monique enjoys working-class social settings because she feels that she can be herself, which is an extra regular person. Although she does not openly identify with the working class, she finds her identity in working-class black spaces.

Jermaine is a middle-class Atlanta native who appears to be in conflict with himself when it comes to middle-class and working-class spaces. He prefers to socialize with middle-class black people because they appreciate the same things. While he enjoys his working-class counterparts, he feels they have embraced a culture that he is “not down with”. However, he feels guilty partying with them, and then living somewhere else.

Terra, a working-class woman, prefers to socialize with working-class blacks, but send her child to a middle-class black school:

I choose my schools based on mindset, not income. And it happened that the school was middle-class black parents cause it’s a private school for black people…. Yeah and I wanted her to be surrounded by people just like her who wanted the same thing. So, um, I feel like some of our kids in better chance environments, if they don’t have a strong foundation, it would be detrimental to their psychological selves. So yeah they could be doctors. But in terms of who they are and how they feel about themselves. And I grew up with that shit and I don’t like that. So, my choice was a mindset and it ended up being a middle-class black priority…and only because of observation of parental involvement and the education provided or not provided depending on the parental involvement,
which depends on the money you have. And that tends to happen on the education you have. Cause you value education. Cause you require that your child is educated.

Terra grew up in an environment where she received a great education in a predominately white setting, but disliked her social experience. Race and mindset is important to her school choice, and she happens to live in a city where a black person can attend a predominately black school with “middle-class values”. Those “middle class values” include parental involvement, which may not be as prevalent in working-class schools, not because the parents don’t value education, but because they may not have the type of job or economic means to spend a significant amount of time at their child’s school during operating hours. A black middle-class school in Atlanta was ideal for Terra’s school choice.

Alexuce, a working-class woman, also felt positive about sending her child to a middle-class black school:

Black middle class. I feel like she can be educated enough and still be around people that can build her up and have a sense of who she is. And when she goes to college or a PWI, she knows who she is….Black working class. She’ll be comfortable around people that look like her. I would have to do a lot of outside stuff to make that education quality work for us. Not because they won’t be teaching her the best things.

Alexuce, like many black parents in my study, preferred to send their children to a school where a majority of the students came from middle-class black families. Respondents saw middle-class schools, whether they are white or black, as having better education, more parental involvement and more resources for student development. These factors appear to be important to the parents; however, cultural identity and self-awareness are equally as important to many of the participants. In some cases, like Alexuce, cultural competency and being around a similar race of people may supersede the quality of academics at the school. Alexuce preferred the middle-class black school because she felt she would get the best of both worlds, strong academics and cultural comfortability. However, if she had to choose between the middle-class white school
(strong academics) or working-class black school (cultural comfortability), she chose the
working-class black school. This choice was so important to her that she is willing to use her
personal time to supplement her child’s education. For many black parents, race and racism has
a deep effect on their mental health; therefore, being in a diverse school with many resources
may not be worth the emotional and mental anguish that a student may suffer from when having
to deal with racism and inequality from teachers and students.

Most blacks across class groups preferred to live in middle-class neighborhoods. Zen, a
working-class man, claimed that living in a middle-class white neighborhood would lend itself to
a better school system and less crime. Sadie, a middle-class woman, prefers a middle-class black
neighborhood as her first choice, and then a middle-class white neighborhood as her second
choice. She claims she has seen working-class black neighborhoods and would not want that for
herself. Shine, a working-class 24-year-old woman, provided one of the more complex
descriptions about race, class and neighborhood choice:

It may not be ghetto stuff happening like they trapping out the house next door. It is but
it may be more discreet in middle-class black and middle-class white neighborhoods.
I’ve witnessed it. But you gone trap wherever. That’s why it’s called the trap. It’s
where you put your hustle up. But I would wanna live in a middle-class black
neighborhood. Cause its middle class. Cause we have jobs and we want better for
ourselves, so we’re gonna push our kids and make sure they on the right path. Then I
would say working-class black people cause that’s where I live in. Few break-ins but
they trappin out the house down the street. But it’s cool cause you aint gone call the
police on them and that type of thing. I can deal with that. Then I don’t know. I guess
I’ll go with the middle-class white, but I’m scared cause my cousin might try to visit me
but I’m not home yet and he waiting outside my house and waiting for me to come home
and that could go left quickly. Or my son might be coming home from the bus stop and
walk in the wrong person yard and stuff like that.

Shine sheds light on some interesting overlap in terms of race and class interaction within a
neighborhood setting. She states that people may participate in the underground economy in
working-class black neighborhoods; however, that type of activity also exists in middle-class
black and white neighborhoods. While this is her perception, Shine still believed that jobs and a desire for a better life is concentrated in middle-class black neighborhoods. However, her racial analysis offers a deeper understanding of housing preferences for blacks. Shine knows that middle-class whites may have the opportunities and resources, but she is not sure if access to that would be worth the life of her family. White people typically see blacks, particularly black males, in white spaces as threatening. These perceptions can lead to police involvement, which has historically and socially resulted in death and injustice for black people in the U.S. To avoid the possibility of racist interactions with whites, Shine and other blacks refuse to live in a white neighborhood and must forego economic opportunities and wealth accumulation through housing opportunities in exchange for keeping their families safe from the results of racism.

### 6.5 Class division in the black community

According to my research, most people claim they do not interact with people outside of their class group, and if they do, it’s mostly on a superficial level. Generally, most blacks only interact with people inside of their perceived class groups. If a middle-class black respondent interacted with a working-class or poor black person in their day-to-day lives, it was either through their job or some charity work with which they were involved. Those participants who interacted with people of a lower-class status were usually the participants who identified as that lower class, even though their actual class status may have been higher than their perceived status. For example, both Terra and Jermaine identified as working class, even though after considering their unique situations they could be middle class. Terra was working class because she recently left a high-paying corporate job to start her own business and was not making much money. However, she was still able to maintain her middle-class lifestyle because she has been
living off the stock options and large savings that she obtained during her time in corporate America.

Jermaine and his wife live in a two-person household. However, he has a professional position, is a college graduate and his household income falls into the range of a middle-class person in Georgia. Still, both Terra and Jermaine were among the few who interacted with working-class blacks outside of their job or charity work. Their interaction with working-class blacks also took place in their neighborhood because they also lived among them. Those middle-class blacks that interacted with working-class blacks generally lived in working-class or poor black neighborhoods. Monique is a middle-class woman that lives with her two children in a poor neighborhood on Atlanta’s Westside. She claims to interact with people from all different classes:

Daily. All of them in my line of work. Most are business interactions. I’m in the process of opening my own academy, so I do a lot with education private education childcare those type of things. So I have people who work for me. So I guess they can be considered working class. I’m extra regular and you work for me, so I guess that makes you a little bit lower. That sounds bad, but I guess that’s what it is. But you know, I have clients and I go into houses with heated floors. Like its 90 degrees outside and you got the got dang heated floors cause you don’t want my feet to get cold when I walk in like what? But they got it. I go in mansions and homes of some who’s who of Atlanta and I deal with all of that on a daily basis. My next-door neighbor on crack. I talk to him every day when he know who I am. So it’s a everyday thang.

While Monique’s class interactions are very diverse, most middle-class blacks in my study experience reverse interactions. Many of them work with and serve working-class and poor blacks at their job, however, they live and socialize with middle-class and upper-class black people.

One key component of the interaction that many middle-class blacks have with working-class blacks is that their more disadvantaged friends/family try to coerce them to give money or resources. Monique mentioned that she is usually the person who takes care of the poor people
in her neighborhood because of her economic status. Terra mentioned that she is in a precarious financial situation, but because of her privilege, she feels emboldened to provide help for her neighbors as well:

Every day. So I have a lot of friends that are poor so I talk to them all the time whether they’re calling me to borrow money or…I don’t think I’m better than anyone. I talk to anybody cause I have a love for people.

While some middle-class blacks may not interact with working-class blacks because they may not live in the same neighborhoods, work with the same people, have the same experiences or frequent the same places, some may also limit their interaction with the poor or working-class because they may feel obligated to provide resources. This feeling of obligation to the more disadvantaged group within the race is a burden that Lamont (2002) notices among the black working-class in her study, and I explore among the middle-class in the next section.

One of the few participants that appeared to have substantial interactions with people across class groups was Lenny. When I asked about his interactions with people outside of his class group, he replied:

I have fun with my working-class friends and go places like bars and juke joints some middle-class people wouldn’t go to. We have a good time. They don’t have any airs about them. Everybody at that church is middle class. My neighbors across the street are working class and renting a house from their mother. I interact with them and some parents at the boys’ school. Some may be working class or poor cause lot of them are from the subsidized housing.

Lenny’s experience was highly unusual as most participants, particularly the middle-class, only maintained strong ties, relationships and substantial interactions with people who were in their class group.

6.6 The Black middle-class burden

While there are economic privileges that are associated with being middle class, the black middle-class experience comes with its own set of challenges and burdens. Although many
black middle-class residents have little problem living among or close to other black people, part of the burden of middle-class blacks who live in lower income areas is that their residential choice allows them to see firsthand the negative neighborhood effects that exist in poor black communities. While their financial status may allow them freedom to shop at better grocery stores, live in bigger homes and put their kids in private schools, it can be difficult for some to watch their working-class and poor counterparts suffer at the hands of poverty and racism. Terra’s experiences can explain this burden.

Terra is currently a working-class woman due to her income and occupation, although she is a graduate of an Atlanta HBCU. She left her job with a six-figure salary to open her own business. She made enough money to live off the benefits she accrued as a middle-class woman in corporate America. While talking about her current class position, she states:

I saved money. I worked for a company that took care of me and I had stock options and seven months of salary no work because of the time I put in. And the time I put in to corporate America afforded me the time I have now.

So, although Terra is currently working class, her middle-class benefits allow her to maintain a privileged lifestyle. This position is unique and is an example of how precarious the class position can be in terms of race.

Although Terra has switched between both middle class and working class, she purchased a house in the city and has lived there for many years. Working-class and poor blacks surround her. Terra has enjoyed her place of residence and does not have the desire to live in a more racially diverse area. Though she enjoys being in a predominately black community, she finds it difficult to see firsthand the hardships that her working-class and poor neighbors must deal with:

I mean I live on a street with three people that own their house on the whole street. Everyone else is primarily section 8. And I see the vicious circle of poverty
happening…. [talking about her neighbor]. Her and her daughter just had a kid. Her other daughter in there with three kids and I’m trying to talk to them about going to school and what their options are and their thinking about getting a check. The other lady cross the street, she already got four kids and she got a new boyfriend and I wanna go over there like I hope you are on birth control because you don’t need no more kids. It’s not really my business, but it is my business. And the girl next to me, she got 5 kids. I stepped in her home, thought I was in the YMCA. When I drive home and some days I be nice and then others I be like get the hell out my yard. Then I see her turn around and pop her kid and be like, “shut the fuck up ole stupid ass”. So, it’s just its they be having babies and aint nobody teaching em. And I’m just like what imma do? What am I gonna do? Kids go to school dirty, electricity was out across the street for like two months. So, she sent the kids somewhere else. I can’t pay your electric bill cause I aint got it like that. You can’t plug into my house cause again I don’t have it like that. But you can charge your phone up occasionally or this and that. But it’s hard because I’m living in the midst of an environment that needs a whole lot of help and I alone can’t help. And I don’t know what to do. I just see the problem getting bigger.

Part of the burden of the black middle class that live in poor black areas is that while they enjoy the culture of being around black people and being a positive influence on their race, the effects of urban poverty surround them, and they are forced to live with systemic racist effects without the means or tools to make a radical change in their community (Patillo 1999). Living in poverty as it reminds you of a situation that you wish you can change but can’t feels like a way of punishing yourself for survivor’s guilt. It is a catch-22 to be a middle-class black person living in a predominately poor black area, which may be the reason why many black affluent Atlantans escape to middle-class black enclaves or predominately white neighborhoods. While they still feel an affinity to their race and a responsibility to uplift their race, the constant reminder of black poverty could be too much to bear and it may be a lot less cumbersome to make change from afar. Unfortunately, middle-class blacks who surround themselves with affluent blacks may migrate themselves into a false reality that could result in an internalized racist frame known as victim blaming. These same blacks could presume that because so many blacks are doing well around them, that the ones that are still in poverty are there because of their own misfortunes and bad decisions.
Monique is also middle class, lives in the “hood” and explains her surroundings in this way:

My neighborhood is predominately black. Unfortunately, its predominately impoverished black. I work in Buckhead, which is predominately white or very financially well-off people. So it’s definitely night and day. Totally different from where I live versus where I work.

Monique finds herself being a light to her community and enjoys the positive effects she has on her people. On the contrary, the violent activity is one of the dangers of living in the hood:

It was actually refreshing and enlightening to move over here. It gives me more motivation to do right, but it definitely has its down side too. You don’t hear no gunshots in Sandy Springs. It wasn’t no crackheads that I saw. They did that behind close doors [right in they mansions]. But out here, I got to help pick em up. Sometimes cause I got to park my car and move em long cause I’m out here and they know I’m the nice lady that [if] they really really need something Imma give it to you. And they like, “oh yeah that lady she gave me the shoes off her feet the other day. If you go knock on her door, she’ll help you”. So, you gotta deal with stuff like that.

During this interview, Monique and I were sitting by her living room window and we heard an array of gunshots not far from her house. Her daughter was in the back room preparing to go to sleep and told her mother she was scared. Monique replied that they were just fireworks, even though we both knew the difference between fireworks and gunshots. We looked at each other and she replied that she had to lie to her daughter so that she would not be scared. This is the reality of the black middle class in the urban ghetto.

Another burden of the middle class that live in poorer areas is that sometimes they become the victims of the poverty in those areas. One common characteristic of poverty in Atlanta and the metro area, is that many times residents live inside of food deserts. Black middle-class residents who reside in the suburbs of DeKalb County live in neighborhoods characterized as low access by the USDA, which means that a third of the people who live there must travel more than a mile to get to a grocery store. Other middle-class blacks that live in poor
or working-class black neighborhoods may have the resources to drive to the grocery store and buy large amounts of food, however, living in a food desert makes it inconvenient for them to have healthy food options. Christina is a middle-class woman who lives in an historical district on the Westside of Atlanta. While she is economically advantaged, she suffers from living in a food desert:

I’ve noticed that we live in a food desert. There’s no grocery store within a mile of here, mile and a half, two miles, that I would buy food at. And I don’t know if I’m missing something, but not that I’ve seen. I got to go over to Mableton. It’s five or six miles.

Although Christina has the means to purchase healthy food options, living in a predominately black neighborhood does not afford her the opportunity or convenience to make that choice. She has to travel out of her way and a longer distance to go grocery shopping, unlike many middle-class whites who have grocery stores and healthy food options that are in close proximity to their home.

In addition to the lack of healthy food options, the black middle class in predominately working-class or poor areas may be subject to criminal activity (Patillo 1999) that is largely the result of systemic racism and poverty. Working-class blacks see dangers associated with drugs, such as violence, as a concern for their safety (Lamont 2002). While middle-class blacks may not live in poverty, the people around them may be poor or working-class and see stealing or robbing their middle-class neighbors as a way of improving their economic situation. Some middle-class individuals find themselves having to protect their resources and lives from people that look like them. This type of living makes some middle-class blacks uncomfortable, so they may move to a more diverse middle-class area. While there, they may not have to witness the economic depression of the poor and working-class. However, they sometimes have to deal with racist actions perpetrated by their middle-class white neighbors. This forces many more
advantaged blacks to feel they must choose between living in a predominately black mixed-income or poor area with no racism and more street crimes, or move to a more diverse area with less poverty but more racism. Lenny’s story is a great example of this dichotomy.

When we first moved here, folks would break in [my husband’s] car and steal his gym bag. And you just got tired of it at some point. And I hate to say it, but then on the other end it’s like do I really wanna live around all white people? Cause I did that. Although my neighbors were nice in [city in Georgia] where we lived. One day I walked out and found this Aryan Nation flyer in our yard saying white people need yall too. And one of them neighbors after we moved in asked us, “You don’t have teenage children over there do you”? Some ole white man thinking cause we black and a teenage person over here is gonna break in they home. You know, and it was like wow. I would rather live in a mixed neighborhood where everybody love everybody. In my world I would like that, but would that happen, I don’t know.

Rachel, a middle-class woman who grew up in metro Atlanta, talks about how she lived in a neighborhood with violence and drugs around her while in the predominately black area of metro Atlanta. Soon, her parents were able to purchase a home in the Stone Mountain area, which was racially diverse at the time. Although she did not have to deal with the social effects of poverty anymore, her neighbors would have KKK meetings at their house and burn crosses in their front yard. These are the residential choices that many middle-class blacks feel they must choose from when deciding to purchase a home or rental property in an affluent or non-affluent area.

Being the economically advantaged black person in the poor area means that she/he is the one the community relies on for their day-to-day needs. In her research, Lamont finds that black people tend to have a collectivist outlook in terms of racial responsibility. They see how important it is to give back to their communities. Because of the precarious position many blacks have, working-class blacks know that one or two setbacks can change their entire class status. However, they also reported their disadvantaged family members and friends being a financial burden to them. This is a similar case for the black middle class. Even though middle-
class blacks may have some advantages, few are privileged enough to take care of the entire neighborhood all the time. This is one of the black middle-class burdens that exists in Atlanta. Alma, a middle class black woman, had this to say about helping disadvantaged blacks, “but I feel like to what end? Speaking of my family and friends. I help, but its like it seems like a never-ending story”.

Many middle-class blacks have no problem helping their disadvantaged counterparts, but the assistance seems like a black hole, and the more advantaged blacks don’t have enough money to make up for years of systemic oppression and racialized economic exploitation. Often, they are the ones that are pressured and feel coerced to bear the economic burden of the race and survivor’s guilt may cause them to use the few resources they have to provide for those in need, leaving them with little to save or use for economic mobility.

Kerry Mann is a 40-year-old middle-class woman from California. In her interview, she discusses the way middle-class blacks must bear the economic burdens of their family members and its effects on the ability to pass wealth down to their offspring.

In my immediate family, just from my siblings, and from one of my parents, they need help. It’s hard for me to help anybody...when I’m still trying to get my inner circle together. And so, I know for many of my friends and stuff like that, that story’s always true. So we would do more if we didn’t have a burden already of trying to uplift those that are around us. Um, we have a tendency to not forget. So I knew a lot of white people who just forgot those parts of their family. And you know, so, part of our financial resources, part of our earnings and stuff, goes to not forgetting those parts of our family. So sometimes we don’t have enough money left over to help anyone else. And I think that that limits how often we can.

Kerry explains the complex relationship between race and class. Many middle-class blacks may have economic privilege, but come from a family that is poor economically and socially.

Providing resources for the family and even the larger race has a direct effect on their ability to create and transmit wealth to future generations. With so much of the racial burden being placed
on the already vulnerable middle class, they are often torn between meeting the immediate needs of their race, or providing money for their families and communities later.

In terms of the black middle-class burden, it seems that the more they help, the more people need help, which is a continuing depletion of the resources among the black middle class. Even if a middle-class person helps their more disadvantaged counterparts financially, it seems like what they give is never enough. Some blacks feel like the resources advantaged blacks provide are never enough for the community or specifically those who are receiving the means. Kennyshia, a middle-class student, had this to say about middle-class blacks giving back to the community:

If you have money, people make you feel obligated to do things in society. Like Tyler Perry or T.I. They got money. Like you only donated this much? This is my money I work for it, what are you doing? I think with money and the black community, it comes with good and bad and the fact that when you have it, people expect you to give more. It is the root of all evil.

The racial uplift concept and the collectivist outlook that black people across classes learn in their communities stays with them when they obtain financial and professional success. The history of race and class shows that black people across classes have had to endure the same life outcomes in the United States (Landry 1987). Therefore, the reality for advantaged and disadvantaged blacks in terms of interaction with the police and racism in public spaces have been the same (Feagin 1991). The black community usually reminds advantaged blacks to never forget where they came from, especially in the examples given by Kennyshia. These examples are unique because both Tyler Perry and T.I. became successful by the support of the black community. Prior to their popularity in Hollywood, and with middle and upper-class whites, their careers remained stable largely because of their predominately black fan base. This loyalty shows that black people support their own entertainers. However, once she/he becomes
financially successful and “crosses over”, they sometimes feel obligated to continue supporting the same community that supported them. Therefore, middle and upper-class blacks are torn between continually proving to their black supporters that they are loyal by donating money, or increase their wealth by minimizing their financial support towards black causes and risk being labeled a sellout. The bigger problem lies in the magnitude of the issues in the black community. There is not enough money among the sector of middle and upper-class blacks in the race to financially rectify the structural issues in the black community, and sometimes it appears that the more a person gives, the more they have to give to continually prove their loyalty to the race.

6.7 Boogie Man: The Paranoia of Poverty

A common theme in the view of middle-class blacks is that many of them have forgotten where they come from and have allowed the working-class and poor blacks to fend for themselves (Hicks and Pitre 2010). While this may be the case for some, others feel that middle-class blacks are not able to provide much financial resources because they too are still in a precarious financial situation. Although they may be more economically well off than the disadvantaged blacks, many middle-class blacks still don’t have the means to provide a sufficient amount of assistance to the disproportionate number of blacks in poverty. Some scholars argue that the racial wealth disparity and systemic racism in the United States does not allow for blacks to participate in intergenerational wealth accumulation in the same way as people of other races (Sullivan, Warren and Westbrook 2001, Shapiro 2004). Other scholars such as Cotton (1990) argue that the disparity in earnings of blacks and whites in white-collar occupations is greater than the disparity in blue-collar occupations. With high rates of intergenerational downward mobility existing within the current black middle class, it is evident that affluence for blacks is not equivalent to whites. In addition, the insecure financial standing of many middle-class
blacks makes them afraid to sacrifice financially, largely because of the huge risk of downward social mobility. While some of my middle-class participants appeared to make enough money to maintain economic stability, returning or slipping into poverty remains a looming fear over their lives. This constant trepidation of poverty is what I call in my research the--- *Boogie Man of Poverty*.

My conversation with Dr. Kelsey Nordstrom inspired this concept of the *Boogie Man of Poverty*. Dr. Nordstrom makes roughly $140,000 dollars annually with no kids in the house. She lives in an affluent neighborhood and has a very stable job with benefits. As an Atlanta native, she grew up middle class, but also suffered downward mobility when her parents divorced, forcing her to live with her mom in Decatur. While residing in the poor area of town, she recalls very negative experiences while living in poverty. After graduating college and medical school, she was able to return to her middle-class Atlanta roots, but the continuous fear of poverty still haunts her to this day:

When you come from poverty, no matter how much you make you always worry that things will go back there somehow. One mistake or one person who doesn’t like you over some foolishness, one person’s jealousy, one person with insecurity. So it’s kind of like being in an abusive relationship. You always have this haunting thing of, you know, I don’t want to go back there. I don’t want to be in that situation again. And so the culture of poverty is real, outside of the scientific piece, the mental culture of poverty. I think if you meet and talk to people who came from real poverty, you’ll find that there’s a, I don’t want to say paranoia, but they’re always concerned about going back there and not wanting to be there. And so the working-class mentality is no matter how much I’ve accomplished, I’m always trying to do more to ensure that I’m not back there. So, I’m consistently working against something that might not even exist or be invisible, but it’s like the boogie man as an adult. I know you’re just like, oh my God that’s fascinating.

Unlike middle-class whites, advantaged blacks have to consistently walk on egg shells even in their middle-class lifestyle. They don’t have the economic or racial privilege needed to support them if they lose their job. Many times, they are the safety net for other family members. This precarious situation is one reason why many middle-class blacks may not “rock
the boat”, complain about workplace racism or sexism, provide an abundance of resources for others, or publicly support controversial issues. All of these examples can lead to a loss of job or resources and can cause many of them to return to the poverty they worked so hard to escape. Kelsey makes a substantial amount of money and may never experience downward mobility, but the simple fear of returning to poverty is enough to regulate her financial and social choices. She speaks of the “mental culture of poverty” or the psychological effects of poverty and how they can determine certain practices. Scholars should further study this line of research when understanding the behaviors of the middle class. While some people conclude that the black middle class have “forgotten where they come from”, my research presents an alternate narrative. Some middle-class blacks do remember where they came from. They remember the pain, frustration, fear and helplessness that came with poverty. This memory of poverty and “where they came from” is what is causing much of the black middle class to be more cautious than other racial groups with their resources. The systemic and psychological effects of poverty continue past socio-economic mobility and affect the black middle class in a practical way. It is difficult to get out of poverty and the looming fear of it can cause some to be hesitant in helping others get out of it as well.

When it comes to the black middle class, many people assume that all of the people in that demographic came from poverty. However, some middle-class blacks were born into an advantaged situation. While this remains true, those who were born middle class still suffer from the Boogie Man and the Paranoia of Poverty. Della and her siblings were born into a middle-class family in Michigan. Both her parents had PhDs and were able to send all their children to prestigious black colleges and pay their tuition out of pocket. Currently, Della and her husband
live very comfortably and make almost a quarter of a million dollars a year. Although Della has never lived in poverty, the boogie man still haunts her:

I wrote on twitter cause people had all kinds of visceral reactions to that like the upper middle class is selfish and I was like I think a lot of people feel like they could lose it at any day. Even though like I’m oddly one of those people. Cause even though I grew up secure, for some reason I have this fear that I could lose it all even though it’s not based on anything. So, I think this stops people from doing as much as they can because they feel like they’re doing everything they can to hold on to their status. It’s not malicious. It’s not trying to be selfish, it just feel like self-preservation.

While it seems understandable that the paranoia of poverty would haunt those who experienced life in disadvantaged neighborhoods, it may be surprising that those middle-class blacks who come from privilege also suffer from the boogie man. This feeling can be the result of the sometimes geographical and social proximity between the black middle, working, and poorer class. While there may be cultural and sometimes institutional boundaries that divide class categories within racial groups, the fact remains that most middle-class blacks have families and/or friends that live in poverty or could be described as working class. Seeing what they go through firsthand can cause them to also feel the effects of the paranoia of poverty. They see what their family and/or friends had to deal with while living in disadvantage and the fear of poverty continues to threaten them. Middle-class blacks who came from privilege learned from other people’s experiences and realized that they did not want to experience poverty, and they become protective of their resources, which to others may come off as bougie and selfish.

Rea, a middle-class black woman saw this same trepidation in peers within her class category:

I think there are many successful black people that don’t care about giving back or helping another brother or sister. I think that exists. And I think that there is a desire that I made it and I’m trying to make sure I’m situated. Don’t know if I can help you. I think there is that here. I think there’s a lot of people trying to keep up with the Joneses. You not gone be a philanthropist or build something great for youth in poverty because you don’t have the money….what is the level of money we talking about?
Rea also recognizes that while there are some middle-class blacks who may not have a desire to help those in need, there are many that do. However, those same individuals have to work so hard to maintain their current economic status that it is difficult to do that and still provide an abundance of resources for the poor and working class. Rea mentions the nuances within middle class. There are many blacks who live middle class; however, they don’t make enough money to make the economic impact that many whites can, largely due to their wealth privilege. To really put a dent in poverty, one would have to make much more than the average middle-class person. Unfortunately, many black people are not in that tax bracket, and it becomes increasingly difficult to make long-lasting change in the economic conditions of many lower income black people.

However, even with this looming fear of poverty, some people still believe that the black middle class are more likely than any other demographic to lend a helping hand both financially and otherwise. When asked if the black middle class does enough to help the poor and working class, Lenny states:

But you never know if someone started a scholarship or gave to Red Cross or humane society. You never know if someone writes [a] check. I think they do a lot. Write the check and send it on.

Lenny argues that the middle class may do a lot for the disadvantaged, but we may not always know about their contributions. Alexuce, a working-class woman had this to say about the help people receive from the black middle class:

I think black people do a lot to help. And it could be an Atlanta thing but whenever I see people giving back, its usually black people, unless it’s some(thing) weird cause then its white people. But every time I go to an event where someone is giving back, its usually a black person coming up with the funding to send some family here or give turkeys out or something like that. I think when it’s like saving animals, that’s white people. Most of the relief poor and working-class black people receive come from middle-class blacks I believe. I feel like whites take extreme causes that’s far removed from them so they can
Alexuce finds that the black middle class and black people in general are more giving than other racial groups. Though she said her analysis may solely exist in Atlanta, she finds that, contrary to some other participants, black people in Atlanta do a lot to help other people that are not as fortunate.

6.8 Conclusion

This analysis is a reason why scholars must study class in conjunction with race and wealth (Shapiro 2004). While policies have been created to help increase employment opportunities for black people in the U.S., which in turn have increased the number of middle-class blacks, the wealth gap remains disproportionate along racial lines. Middle-class whites continue to maintain an economic safety net through the transference of generational wealth that allows them to navigate the perils of middle-class life through unexpected bills and family assistance without it negatively affecting their class status and ability to pass down resources to their children. Current middle-class blacks are, in many ways, the first in their family to reach this social status and have no economic safety net to support them during times of financial hardships. In many ways, they are the only ones supporting other members of their family, making it more difficult to save money and pass it down to their children and create generational wealth. With many middle-class black families, they transfer money backwards to take care of parents, grandparents and siblings, instead of forward (like many middle-class whites) to their children. After years of these practices, little is left over for the children to build upon, and in many ways the children who are now adults have to start their life with little to no economic safety net and sometimes use their income to help the parents that could not pass anything down to them. The cycle continues. Class position does not yield the same reality for blacks and
whites, thus researchers must address the issue of both income and wealth disparities along racial lines when assessing the progress of the black middle class (Shapiro 2004).

While race and class intersect to help explain a much more complex identity for black people in the United States, it can also cause divisions within the black community. When asked if money changes the way a black person is treated in regard to race, many participants concluded that advantaged and disadvantaged blacks experience racism. The perpetrator in a racist encounter does not know the class of a black person prior to the interaction. Class does not exclude a black person from being the victim of racism, however, a higher economic status provides one with more resources to combat or fight the racist encounter after it has occurred. Middle and upper-class blacks are able to hire lawyers, go to court, and use professional networks to shed light on racism (Feagin 1993) and can be more likely to bring about justice after it has already occurred. Class can help combat racism, but it does not prevent it in an interracial context. However, in an intraracial context, class may have much more of an immediate impact. Class within the black community can dictate where a person chooses to live (which can ultimately affect who they interact with, what type of education their kids receive and what type of resources are available to those who may not have access) and how their own people may treat them. While it is true middle-class blacks have an economic advantage that allows them access and opportunities not afforded to their working-class and poor counterparts, the racial wealth disparity that exists in the United States makes it difficult for middle-class blacks to be as generous with their giving as middle-class whites. Many are sensitive to the plight of their brothers and sisters, but their fear of experiencing or returning to the poverty they worked so hard to escape affects how much they are willing to sacrifice. With class being an indicator of many encounters among black people, it is imperative that scholars continue to
explore this identity to understand the complicated behavior patterns that exist inside the black community and how one can overcome these socially constructed divisions across class groups.

In Chapters 4-6, I explored the way race, class and in some ways gender, intersect to form unique experiences, interactions, and identity boundaries between working and middle-class blacks. However, Atlanta is a unique city, with a history, demography and culture that is vastly different from other cities in the United States, specifically in the South. In Chapter 7, I examine the way these intersections play out in Atlanta, also known as the Black Mecca. Exploring both the affluent and disadvantaged sides of the “Black Mecca,” I gain access to narratives that explain the effects of income inequality and poverty on black Atlantans, as well as the nuances and hierarchy that exists in black affluent Atlanta. Though the city has been known as a place that is too busy to hate, racism and racial hatred is prominent in the metropolitan areas that are adjacent to the inner city. One key finding in this chapter explores the way place of origin affects the way blacks across class and gender identities perceive Atlanta and its Black Mecca status.
7 ATLANTA: CLASS AND RACE IN THE "BLACK MECCA"

“Aint nothing like Atlanta, you don’t know what you gone get. This is the most nastiest, dirtiest, ugliest, most beautiful, wonderful place in all of America….All your dreams can come true at Magic City or you can get killed at a stop light. You never know.”

-Katt Williams 2006-

“Describing Atlanta, “Scene was so thick. Low rides, seventy-seven Sevilles El Dawgs, nuttin but them ’llacs. All the players, all the hustlers, i’m talking about Black man heaven.”

-Outkast 1994-

Outkast, the world-renowned Atlanta based rap group, describe Atlanta’s social scene as “black man’s heaven”. Gucci Mane, another notable rap musician, refers to it as “the hip hop mecca”. To others, Atlanta is the Promised Land for black folks and a place where a person of color can find opportunity and experience cultural and financial growth. After collecting interview data from thirty-four participants, I’ve found that many people view Atlanta as a special place for black people. Most of the interviewees had very positive responses when asked about their overall experience in Atlanta. Whether the person was poor, working class, or middle class, all thirty-four participants appeared to have a love for the city. As expected, the biggest initial complaint about Atlanta was the traffic, but besides that, Atlanta natives and transplants alike saw the city as a very special place. While Atlanta and the metro area can be a haven for black people, there are aspects of the city and its experience that often get overlooked when describing this “Black Mecca”. This chapter draws attention to the elements of Atlanta that continue to attract black people from all over the country. While this Black Mecca title is a popular perception of Atlanta, I also introduce readers to a lesser known side of the city. I describe the poverty, class inequality, and other disadvantages that many low-income and working-class people experience in the city and metropolitan area. Later in the chapter, I discuss class as a performance and the way Atlanta culture can pressure people to perform class. In this chapter, I explore the way residents understand race within the context of the urban city. Using a
very distinct highway in Atlanta, I show how city structures can act as markers for racism and
dictate who experiences racism throughout the city. Lastly, we investigate the relationship
between place of nativity and people’s perception of Atlanta as a Black Mecca. This section
responds to the part of the research question that explores the way class may influence how
residents observe their city and its connection to their racial progress.

7.1 The Black Mecca---- Ain’t No Half-Steppin

Atlanta is truly a magical city (no pun intended). It holds a special place in the hearts of
many people who get the opportunity to traverse the streets of the city. When asked about what
it was like growing up in Atlanta, Kelsey responded:

So, it was amazing. There was a sense of culture growing up. There was a huge sense
of pride in community, and for a very long time, probably up until I was about nine or ten
years old, I had no idea about poverty, about blackness, or that I was different in any
way, shape, or form…Churches everywhere. So, I spent a lot of time in church.

Kelsey was not the only Atlanta native to mention how the city fostered a sense of community
among black residents growing up. Jermaine states:

Pretty much all positive for me. Thinking backwards…It was small enough to be
connected…a sense of neighborhood especially among African Americans at least from
what I’ve experienced. Atlanta was truly more of a Black Mecca then because we
owned. Every single business in the neighborhood was a black face. I knew their family,
you knew my family. We dined together, went to church together, shopped together. So
it was, I had a positive upbringing….so it was very positive. As I reached teen years,
things started changing a bit. I saw the effects of drugs and other minorities entering
the community. Seemed generational to me, but even then, it was still positive things.
Always positive.

Both Kelsey and Jermaine spoke positively about coming of age in Atlanta. Even with the onset
of drugs and its effects on the black community in Atlanta, the overall experience in the city was
still overwhelmingly positive.

Atlanta is not only a special place for people who have grown up here, but it has also had
a positive effect on Atlanta transplants as well. Giselle had this to say about the city:
It’s like a great awakening for black people. Like it’s the one place in the U.S. that we know we run it. A little bit, like we kinda running it. I think it’s kinda a lighthouse for a lot of other nations and people know that they feel like if they move to Atlanta, they will have better opportunities, and it’s true. My income has tripled since I moved here. My network base has quadrupled.

Participants see Atlanta as, not only a close-knit community and place of culture for black Atlanta natives, but also a place where black people control systems of power, particularly in the political arena. I discuss, in further detail, race and the political power of Atlanta in chapter 9. It is a city where it is not uncommon to see black people in positions of influence. Whether we are discussing politics, business, or social change, there seems to be no place that a black person cannot rise in the city of Atlanta. Readers should not take this feeling lightly. For centuries, black people in the United States have spent their entire lives trying to find a space in this country, or outside the country, where they belong. Whether it was running North during slavery, moving to Europe during the early twentieth century, migrating North during the Great Migration, or moving back to the South during the late twentieth century, blacks have been on a consistent search for their mecca (Wilkerson 2010). Black people seeing Atlanta as that place is an emotional experience, even to the point where Christina from Kalamazoo, Michigan began to cry as she thought about the beauty of seeing progressiveness and diversity among black people in Atlanta. Compared to how she grew up, Atlanta was a haven.

I like that it’s diverse, right? Growing up in Kalamazoo, we were the only black family in the neighborhood. I got called nigger more times growing up by white girls in the neighborhood who would be my friend half the time, and then the other time would pick up sticks or push me down…. I went to (a university) for my master’s degree, which was awful. I went to (a university) for my PhD, which I thought would be like [a certain city], but was not. And then I came here, and it was the first time where I learned what – this is going to make me cry, progressive black people are, right? I had never seen that.
Giselle states, it’s a place where black people “run it,” and an example to other cities that if blacks and whites can put aside racial difference, they can work together to allow people of various races to help make opportunities available to a more diverse group of people.

These opportunities have often led to the creation of a large black middle to upper class that exist in Atlanta. The huge concentration of a black upper class comes at a shock to many people who move here from other cities. Ressy, a middle-class woman from Orlando and New York, and a graduate of an Atlanta University states:

I would definitely say one of the most striking things when I came to Atlanta was the fact that there was such a large upper middle class, wealthy, even group of African Americans. You did not see that in [previous city]. In terms of black professionals and, you know, going to Spelman everybody’s dad was a doctor or owned something…So that was pretty jaw dropping when I first got to Atlanta, to see the kind of money that families had that looked like me, so yeah.

Typically, black generational wealth is something that people attribute to white folks. However, Atlanta is a place where many people first come in contact with what appears to be black generational wealth. Jameka, an Atlanta transplant from North Carolina describes it this way:

Even when I talk to people from Atlanta who lived in Atlanta for longer than I have and they talk about this thing of old black money, and I’m like, I have never heard of even that terminology before coming to Atlanta. What is this old black money mean? Meaning that there’s this generational and I don’t even know if it’s wealth, or you’re just in a certain status based on your family and things of that sort. So, I never even heard of such a thing before I came to Atlanta. Like this notion of black people having generational wealth or generational power or generational prestige based on who your father was, who your mother was back in the day and every like that…I’d never even heard of that concept. I was like, rich black people? What do you mean? Now, I’m used to that from North Carolina with white people. I’m used to that, but never with black people. I have never heard black people kind of carry their last names as something so powerful almost. Even if it’s not wealth, it’s that last name, what that last name meant. So never came cross that until I moved to Atlanta.

Lawrence Graham (1999) goes into this notion of name and wealth in Atlanta, which I discuss later.
These opportunities that help to maintain one’s upper-class lifestyles can also lead to material wealth that, outside of Atlanta, many people may attribute to a white way of life. Atlanta transplants are shocked to see black people living the same way white people live in other cities. Monique states:

When I got here, I was shocked because I’ve never really seen very many black people of prominence. I was shocked to see, oo, it’s a Lamborghini in Buckhead, but it’s a black woman driving it. What?

Seeing a large number of black people with material riches is exciting to young people of color who move here from other cities. Monique did not equate blackness with affluence until she moved to Atlanta. Mick is a 47-year-old middle-class transplant from Arkansas. While attending college in the city, he was shocked by the way black people lived in Atlanta:

I was hyped to go home for Thanksgiving. How was Atlanta? A drop top BMW pulls up next to me at the mall, sitting on some nice wheels and who is behind the wheel? A Benz pulled up behind it and it was another brother. There was a big cream, with the pillars and it was somebody like me, walking through the door! Coming from Arkansas, it was like, telling people that, their mouths were dropping to the floor, and I was like yeah.

Ressy mentioned the material wealth in her interview as well:

So I ended up getting this nanny job with a family that lives off Cascade, and that was just like, you know, because Cascade is like, I mean, clearly it is the black Buckhead. So, the woman was a doctor. She is a doctor. She’s an OBGYN, and her husband owned a trucking company. They had a house with an elevator in it….But people were mega successful. I just remember thinking, wow! I associate that with Atlanta.

The middle-class lifestyle has also motivated people to move to and stay in Atlanta. Living in a city of black prominence and success had a positive effect on Monique’s own enthusiasm and drive. Because a large concentration of successful black people surrounded her, this encouraged her to continue reaching towards her own goals and dreams:

Atlanta definitely made me step my game up especially with the new circle of friends that I started meeting. I mean, just the circle of friends that I met at church. They were church-going Sabbath-keeping people like me. But these friends were business owners. They are musicians. They are artists. They can sing. They can dance. They can build businesses. I got friends that can go from associates degrees to PhDs, to all of these
people and their like their doing something. So, moving here, I had to step myself up, like I had to. I want to keep up with my friends. I want to keep up with the social circle, so I got to do this... Like they really got they shit together. Like they buying houses. Their doing stuff. Like their young successful black people doing stuff. So yeah it’s a pusher. ...So it’s definitely a city that’s gonna make you step your game up foreal. Aint gone be no half steppin here. Either you gone get it or you aint.

While Atlanta is known as a place where black people have the material possessions that white people have in other cities, it is also a place where one can obtain a wealth of knowledge and culture. Terra moved here from Illinois and the city challenged her intellect:

So, coming down here like I said I was exposed to people like me. I was exposed to people who had a similar thirst for knowledge. Not just book knowledge, but knowledge of self and introduced to things like the Five Percenters and Frances Cress Welsing...seeing Angela Davis...Cheik Anta Diop’s son. It was just like whole bunch of exposure.

Respondents see Atlanta as a haven and can even be a reverse world for black folks. Outside of Atlanta, you may find white people that view blacks as inferior, and some whites who purposely move to other areas so that black teachers do not teach their children. In present-day Atlanta, you may see a reverse action. Ressy argues:

Maybe white teachers don’t want to work at these schools because you will have black parents that are questioning you. I don’t want that white. So, the flipside exists in Atlanta for sure or in any place, but in Atlanta for sure where, again, you could live your whole life just being around black people. So, there are black parents who don’t want their kids to have that white you know what. So, you got to be ready for that.

I am careful to say that this is not an example of reverse racism, because that does not exist. Instead, this example is used to explain how the wealth of black teachers and education is so vast in Atlanta, that black parents can make a choice to not have their children taught by white teachers, which is very similar to the choices white parents make in cities across the United States. Blacks not only make these choices when it comes to education. Terra says this about the opportunity to choose black professionals in Atlanta:
I mean it’s like “Oh my god I can’t believe it”. So my mom comes down here and she’s like, “oh my god you got a black doctor….You got a black female OBGYN”. Well why wouldn’t I? I got a choice down here. Why would I have a white man looking at me when I can have a black woman looking at me?…. Growing up in Illinois, it wasn’t the case. I didn’t see myself on TV. I didn’t see myself in the doctor’s office. Rarely saw myself teaching. It was a bunch of white people.

This opposite world that blacks inhabit in the city of Atlanta can also give white people a sense of the way black people live on an everyday basis. Ressy explains this in the following story:

A friend that I made when I was in Brazil, she went to Wellesley. Her and I went to Bahia together. It’s the state in Brazil where it’s majority black. She noticed that she was one of only – she didn’t see any other white people, and it made her feel uncomfortable. She remarked on it, and we had this whole discussion on it, and I hope she remembers that discussion because she was out of her element for the first time in her life. And I’m like, oh honey, welcome [to my world].

Atlanta, like Brazil, is a place where the black population is so dense, that seeing a white person can be rare, so rare that whites can feel that same lonely unnerving feeling that black people may feel in many other cities in the United States.

7.2 The Other Side of the Black Mecca

“The hand that rocks the cradle, rules the world”. –Malcolm X–

VICE was founded in 1994, and is a print magazine and website that focuses on arts, culture and news topics. In 2011, VICE started Noisey, which is an imprint that chronicles new and exciting music all over the world. It is one of the most successful music brands on the planet. In 2015, Noisey shot a ten-part documentary on Atlanta’s famous trap music scene and the cultural impact it has on the city and worldwide. An exchange between the host of the documentary and famous rapper 21 Savage explores two sides of Atlanta and some of the ways in which they interact with each other:

21 Savage: Gang Tap been taking pictures of me since I was a lil boy. Taking pictures of my tattoos, all that shit. Just because of the area where a nigga be hanging at. Like this a drug area. This a gang area.
Host: How did it become a drug area?
21 Savage: Cause it’s like, the police label it that. Cause the whole world is a drug area if you wanna be technical.
Host: yeah, but there are these two worlds in Atlanta. You have the Black Mecca, the universities, a lot of black millionaires and then you have the trap.
21 Savage: The Black Mecca gotta get they drugs from where? [long pause] The trap gone always have access to all communities because everybody does drugs.

While Atlanta has two seemingly opposing sides, the Black Mecca and the Trap, 21 Savage claims that drugs are a common link that brings these two worlds together. Drugs are often located in the poor and desolate areas of urban cities, and affluent upper and middle-class people of all races travel to these spaces to purchase or consume drugs. The great thing about being in Atlanta is that you know you live in a city with vast amounts of black wealth and power; however, being here can also give a person a false sense of reality. Ressy states:

The chances that the doctor is going to be black is very high in Atlanta. You see government. You see the mayor. I mean it’s just like there’s no limits here…. That’s why I think Atlanta can be bad because it puts you in a state of mind where you’d think things are better than they are. Because if you look at numbers, and you looked at the numbers of black doctors period across the country, you’d be like what the hell? There’s like this many in Atlanta alone….Atlanta, it can kind of mess you up that way.

While this city boasts a large black middle class and sizeable black upper class with black political power to match, Atlanta also maintains high levels of poverty. There is much to be desired and exposed to in this city, however, a person’s economic class can determine what type of Atlanta they are able to experience. Mari is a 73-year-old working-class Atlanta native who lives in the city. She describes the other side of the Black Mecca this way:

There are a lot of uneducated people, mental problems, drug problems, minimum income. So, you can’t reach the level, the educated and professionals are at and its more poor people than affluent….More people on poverty level than affluent in my estimation, cause I live in this kinda community so I’m a see all these people in this community. These are people on food stamps and section 8. I see way more of them than affluent. I know some black professionals and executives, but there are way more people on and below poverty level.
In the 1980s and 1990s, Atlanta was one of the major cities affected by the crack epidemic and the war on drugs. While there is much research on the violence and poverty that erupted in inner-city Atlanta (Etienne and Faga 2014, Hobson 2017), many participants explained the way these years affected the metropolitan area as well, specifically places like Decatur and Scottsdale. Rachel moved from the city of Atlanta to Decatur, which is a metropolitan area outside the city. She explained her upbringing in this way:

We moved -- bought a house and moved kind of down the street into Decatur. It started off cool, but the longer we were there the crack epidemic started to hit, and it got bad. I remember a friend of mine that I walked home from school with, she had got shot in a drive by walking home from school, and it just happened that that day I was playing hooky and pretended to be sick and made my daddy come pick me up….I got to be aware of my surroundings. I got to pay attention. “No, I don’t want any drugs. No, I don’t want to sell drugs”. It’s funny, but it’s not because you offering a 10-year-old drugs to sell. It was just crazy.

Tommy, a working-class 30-year-old male from Scottsdale Ga, describes growing up in metro Atlanta, like most natives, as a close-knit community that still keeps in touch to this day.

However, growing up in a less advantaged neighborhood came with its set of challenges:

Me growing up in [rural Georgia]. Scottsdale is a small community...a community- based city. Everyone know each other and was kind of related. It's like really having a family....You know you hear some bad things about your family. You hear some good things about your family. People getting shot, on drugs, HIV, stuff like that, but it's somewhat normal, when you don’t have any outside influence to come in and change your perception. So, it's like growing up, that is normal and familiar to you....First of all, I was raised in a single house, single mother, my father was around though....In my neighborhood of course, the way to make money is to sell drugs...playing football in the streets, after you get through doing homework, eight o'clock, nine o'clock, take a bath, go to sleep, wake up in the morning.

Both middle-class and working-class black native Atlantans describe life as a close-knit family type of community. However drugs, violence, and death appear to be much more common in the more disadvantaged working-class neighborhoods than the middle-class areas. Tommy’s experience confirms what research suggests, which is that parents often place black students
from middle-class backgrounds in after-school programs, extracurricular activities, etc.

However, working-class black students usually play outside in the neighborhood after school.

Shine described her working-class upbringing in a metropolitan area of Atlanta, this way:

You a kid raising yourself. Your mom is always at work. Go outside hang out with your friends. You might get into some trouble. Your mom will get mad cause she gotta leave work. Stuff like that.

Alexuce, another working-class woman, claims:

Because my mom had to have like 3 jobs at once…me and my siblings shared a room and it was like a small apartment and we didn’t do family vacations. Like if I went to Jamaica to stay with my grandma, it was so my mom could work more.

The working-class experience does not allow for exposure to some of the Black Meccanisms that more middle-class blacks can experience. Once Alexuce experienced social mobility, she began to see life differently:

Because my mom worked all the time, it wasn’t like we could get involved in things. My life basically consisted of going to school, coming home, nothing that more money had to be spent on. Then, when we became middle class we used to go to museums and enjoy Atlanta, the world of coke and I could go on a field trip or something. I could experience more as middle class. Access to more. And get more of what Atlanta has to offer. When you working class, the only thing you have is a book or a TV to experience things.

Like Tommy, Alexuce also lived on the other side of the Black Mecca. She was not able to see what non-natives describe as the Black Mecca. However, unlike Tommy, Alexuce’s mother earned a better job and was later able to afford to show her a different side of the same city that she had been living in for most of her life. Kelsey also experienced a class transformation; however she went from middle-class to poor, due to her parent’s divorce. She describes her middle-class Atlanta days this way:

Middle class made me feel more included. There was more opportunities that seemed to be attached to it. Not just a thing in this little bubble. We were out more. We were exposed to more. We were doing more. Even my parent’s friends were very successful, and their kids were, you know, kids who were out and about and all that great stuff. And my parents were involved in various organizations that kept us active.
Like Alexuce, Kelsey recognized that being middle class allowed her more exposure to the Black Mecca side of Atlanta.

Raven is a 79-year-old working-class woman from Harlem, New York. She lived through experiences that my generation can only read about or watch in movies and documentaries. The name Harlem reminds historians of the New Negro Movement. It was the first city that historians gave the title “Black Mecca”. By the second decade, Harlem became a significant staple of black culture in the country and scholars labeled and viewed it as a “mecca”. Books like *Black Manhattan* (1930) by James Weldon Johnson, *Negro Metropolis* (1940) by Claude McKay, and the essay “Harlem: The Cultural Capital” by Alain Locke in *The New Negro*, further substantiate the assertion that blacks considered Harlem the black capital. Its name gives many black people the same feeling Atlanta does today. However, due to urban decay, deindustrialization and gentrification in the mid-twentieth century, Harlem started to transition and soon became a place that was plagued with drugs, violence, and unemployment.

Thelma saw what Harlem once was and what it had become. She wanted something different for her sons. As a member of the Nation of Islam and follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, she sought advice from Minister Malcolm X. His words along with an *Ebony* magazine cover prompted her to pack up and move to Atlanta:

Raven- What brought me to Atlanta? I was looking at a magazine and Maynard Jackson was on the cover of *Ebony*. And they called Atlanta the black mecca of the south. And that inspired me. I had two children who were well adjusted. And some of my sons’ peers in New York were going to jail and that was not my dream for my children. There was a spiritual voice that told me to come to Atlanta. I had good well-adjusted children and I knew if I remained in New York in Soho and I knew some of my sons’ friends were going to jail and I knew that was not what I wanted for my children, so I heard an inner voice say “come to Atlanta”. I only knew one person here. But I heard a voice and saw Maynard Jackson on *Ebony* magazine and they called it the mecca of the south. That’s what motivated me...
Interviewer-- So when you saw it said Atlanta was the Black Mecca of the south, what did that mean to you?

Interviewee-- It meant when I thought of mecca I thought of a civilization where people were building and creating. And that’s what I wanted for my children and I’ve always been conscious. I had an affiliation with the Nation Of Islam. And I remember Malcolm X told me “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”. All that put together and I knew what I wanted for my sons and it was a better way of life.

Interviewer-- Did you know Malcolm X?

Interviewee-- I did not know him, but I went to the mosque on 116th street in New York and he had the dispute with the Nation of Islam. He left the Nation and started an organization in the Audubon Ballroom when he broke away. So one Sunday, while I was there I asked him what can the black woman do to further the cause and he said, “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”. What that meant to me was, it was up to me to expose my children and keep them out of harm’s way.

Malcolm X’s quote, “the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world” is a quote that means, expose your child to a better life. Exposure was a key to liberation. Raven’s reasons for moving to Atlanta are not uncommon. In the 1970s and 80s, people viewed Atlanta as the place where black people can be exposed to a better life. As this perceived mecca, it appeared that Atlanta was a safe space from the racism, poverty, and dismay that existed in other parts of the county. Although Raven moved to Atlanta in the 1970s, she was not the only Atlanta transplant that saw this city as a haven from the concentrated poverty and negative neighborhood effects of the urban North. Renee is a 38-year-old middle-class doctoral student from Harlem, New York. She came of age during the height of the crack epidemic, and recalls why she decided to move to Atlanta:

I remember coming here and feeling like it was an amazing place because where I lived it was extreme poverty. The conditions were really, really bad. It’s hard for people to realize how bad it was in Harlem when I grew up, like the height of the crack era. Rats everywhere. I would go in the kitchen and it would be roaches everywhere, covering the stove. Sometimes we didn’t have water. Once our bathroom was closed off by the city. Our family would literally pee and shit in the bags and throw it out the window. It was really bad, really fucked up. Stepping on crackheads and all of that. Imagine coming from that every summer to Atlanta, to a big ass house every summer.…. when I was pregnant
with my daughter, I was 8 months and I was sleeping on the floor of my girlfriend’s house, because my boyfriend at the time, put me out….I was like if I have a baby here, I’m going to be stuck here and it’s going to be a really fucked up life for my baby, so I wanted to move to Atlanta. It was the only place I knew, with all the beauty and fun and fond memories of coming here to visit my aunt. I decided to move on a Monday and I was here on a Friday. I stayed with my girlfriend who went to Clark Atlanta, at her house. She had two roommates …. I stayed with them and it was amazing because it was still that time in Atlanta where the streets were paved in like fucking gold. I was 8 and ½ months pregnant and had a job by the end of the fucking week…. It was a different time. There were jobs. Apartments were everywhere.

Even though Renee moved to Atlanta almost thirty years after Raven, they came for the same reason, to give their children a better life. Renee describes Atlanta as a place where the streets were paved with gold for black people. The reason why she describes it this way was because during this time, she was able to get a job and housing in a short amount of time all while being 8 months pregnant. These opportunities are not available for black women in other parts of the United States and it is what makes Atlanta appear to be a special place.

Here, the working class of Atlanta may have the opportunity to interact with the middle class in churches and other social institutions; however, there can be a geographical separation between the black working class, poor and middle class that can keep the low-income residents from being consistently exposed to the economically advantaged lifestyle and culture of the middle class. Earlier, Monique boasted having successful friends and they inspired her to continue her path to academic success. However, there is a down side to this experience:

Now, I think that out of my circle of friends, I am one of the few that live in the city. Like in the heart of the city. I mean really in the hood if you really want to be technical with it. Everybody else is more like on the outskirts like in the Snellvilles and Douglasvilles and all these other places. So their kind of more in the outskirts, but their established.

Atlanta and the people here motivate each other to achieve their goals. However, the geographical separation between the black prominence in the outskirts of Atlanta and the black working-class in the city separates Monique from her source of inspiration. The only time she
sees this black prominence and excellence is in church or when she makes a conscious effort to be around her friends. However, this exposure is limited because eventually she goes back to “the hood”, and her successful black friends go back to the outskirts of the city. This geographical separation, largely the result of gentrification, white flight, the out migration of the black middle class and educational segregation continues to create a class division between the black working and middle class.

7.3 **Faking the Funk: Image vs. Reality in Atlanta’s Black Middle Class**

In Karyn Lacy’s book *Blue-Chip Black*, she focuses on middle-class black communities where poor blacks are not present. This study brings attention to the growing black middle class in the South by using Washington D.C. as a testing site. Lacy organizes her findings into a theoretical construct known as the “black middle-class tool kit”. The black middle-class tool kit is comprised of public, status-based, racial and class-based identities.

In public settings, middle-class blacks employ certain identities to cement their position in American society and assert their middle-class status, in hopes of eliminating or curtailing racial discrimination. One way middle-class blacks achieve this is through differentiating themselves from lower-class blacks. This strategy is known as *exclusionary boundary-work*. Lacy claims that physical appearance is one of the easiest ways to help identify as middle class. The type of clothing a person wears visually separates them from lower-class blacks. It is a type or symbol of identity. In addition to this method, some middle-class blacks will also elaborate on the similarities they have with middle-class whites, which is known as *exclusionary boundary-work* (Lacy 2007). Middle-class blacks do this because the usual perception of middle-class society rarely includes blacks or blackness and middle-class blacks want to establish social unity with their white counterparts.
Though Atlanta boasts a successful black middle and professional class that displays their income status through material goods, educational networks, annual vacations and private schools, my research also reports that it can be difficult to determine who can afford the middle-class lifestyle in Atlanta and who is pretending to live a certain life to fit in. Several participants reported experiencing people in Atlanta who imitate what they see on television to fit in.

Della, a middle-class woman, found that some people may not have everything they want people to think they have. In fact, she argues that in her experience, the level of “faking the funk” may be on a higher level in the Black Mecca, than in other places that she’s visited or lived:

I think compared to other places, I think people are aspiring to look like they have more or to even have more, wherein as a lot of other places it’s good to be middle class and people are happy with that. Here, it feels like everybody has to look flossy and their wealthy even though they are actually not.

Lenny was very impressed with the level of black progression that exist in Atlanta; however, he did not like how people seemed to pretend like they had more than they really did:

So, I was really impressed to see the progression of black people you see here. Initially, this was one of the main things that impressed me. I don’t like the traffic and since this housewife thing everybody wants to be the next housewife and pretend like they have more than what they have. I don’t really like that. This pretending is pretty general across races.

Lenny’s experience shows us that the division between performed and actual social class is not specific to the black middle class. He reports that “faking the funk” happens across all racial groups. Later, he admits that he too “fakes it” and argues that sometimes a person does this to fit in to the more elite circles of Atlanta:

I am who I am and I grew up poor in the hood. I don’t try to hide it. Sometimes I do, but it don’t last long. The true me, it comes out. I fake it to fit into the middle class, but at some point, I’m just a down home brother. It’s hard sometimes putting on airs. You have to. Especially running in circles with [my husband].
Lenny’s husband is an important figure in Atlanta, and he finds himself having to pretend like he is something that he is not to maintain good ties and perform class for his husbands’ colleagues, friends or associates. While he is not saying that he pretends that he has more than he does, he admits that faking like he is comfortable among the middle-class, when he is “just a down home brother” is sometimes necessary.

Rea, like Della, also noticed that people in Atlanta often perform class in a way that may not be in line with their actual economic category:

The things that I don’t like about Atlanta. I think it can be and people can be superficial here. I think a lot of people are pretending like they either have money or clout or prestige or everybody has kind of but a lot of people are faking it til you make it. That’s the scene I don’t like. I think there are a lot of social climbers and so I don’t love that.

The pressure of Atlanta’s visible elite black middle class can make some people feel like they must fake it until they make it, thus making it difficult to determine who is economically advantaged and who is maintaining appearances. While there is a division between displayed economic status and actual social class, it is important to note that my experience in this study was the opposite of what many respondents say they experienced in Atlanta. Although many people say they see people identifying and performing class rituals that are higher than their actual class status, several of my participants downplayed their class status and identity. Individuals who were highly educated with a six-figure salary still chose to identify as working class. It was rare to find a participant who self-identified a class category that was higher than their educational background, income status and occupation. Most of my participants either played down their class status or identified with a class status that was consistent with the class description reported.
7.4 I 285—Racism’s Shield

Although all participants described having had experienced some level of racism in their lives, data shows that Atlanta residents typically reported initially not having memory of anti-black racism from whites. Due to the city and metro area being heavily segregated based on race and class, there can be very little interaction between blacks and whites in metro Atlanta. When talking about the amount of contact blacks and whites have in Atlanta, Terra, a working-class woman from Springfield, IL claims, “Coming down here…my mom was like you have to work to see white people and she likes that”. When I asked Kelsey, a middle-class doctor and Atlanta native, if people had ever mistreated her because of her race while growing up in Atlanta, she claimed:

No. I didn’t experience that until I went to graduate school in [a different state], which is a completely different culture. Even though it’s in the south, it’s completely different. And that was 2004.

Later she recalled:

Wait, let me back that up. I took a class at [a school in Atlanta], as an adult, my sophomore year of college. It was an anthropology class, and the professor did not like my response about slavery. And a couple white boys in the class didn’t like it either. I could care less, at that time. And so that was the first time that I really had any experience with a debate over race, and a debate over black women’s bodies, and who they belonged to. That’s the only time I can think of.

Jermaine, an Atlanta native, states:

From elementary to high school…then to college to my first job was all African American…I work for an HBCU so yeah even now. But in the past five years, I’ve also taken a job at [another university in Atlanta] which changed all that completely. So up until I was 35 that’s how it was.

Jermaine had not had serious and constant contact with white people on a regular basis in Atlanta until about five years ago. Kelsey had not had a racialized encounter until she was in college. Although it had to do with the intersection of race and gender, people could see that racialized
encounter as mild compared to other more severe stories about race and racism. Christina, a middle-class woman from Michigan, felt that being middle class in other areas of the United States did not shield her from overt and explicit racism, but in Atlanta the black middle class have a different experience:

Growing up in [Michigan], we were the only black family in the neighborhood. I got called nigger more times growing up by white girls….experience in being middle-class in Atlanta] I don’t get called nigger. I live among more middle-class people of color.

Being part of the black middle class here in Atlanta can be a safe space from the toxic racism found in other parts of the U.S. In addition, there is a class element that Christina finds unique about Atlanta. Patillo (1999) argues that the black middle class share the same institutions, resources and experiences as the black poor and working class. However, there are places in the country where the black middle class do not live among each other, but instead must make a choice between living around white middle-class people or poor/working-class blacks. There are few enclaves in these cities where the middle-class black group can be both black and middle class. Henry Louis Gates (2005) claims that this is what makes Atlanta unique, in that here black people can express their cultural characteristics and be openly black, while enjoying the luxuries of a middle-class lifestyle. Atlanta is one of few cities where Christina can choose what color she wants her middle-class life to be. For her, she prefers to live among other middle-class blacks largely because of the perpetual racism she experienced at the hands of white people in Michigan. Christina has achieved academic and professional success, and wants to enjoy it without having to compromise her blackness or sanity when having to negotiate race and racism in her neighborhood, job and community. Atlanta gives her the space to be free from these extra social burdens that are normal in many other cities in the United States.
People born and raised in Atlanta seem to have this unspoken protection from anti-black white racism. Terra implied in an earlier quote that in Atlanta you can go your whole life without seeing a white person. A person can be born in a black hospital, live in a black neighborhood, go to black schools, go to a black church, graduate from a black high school, go to a black college, get a job at a black-owned business, retire from a black company, and buried in a black funeral home. You can go your whole life without seeing or interacting with white people. Although they were being facetious, there’s a little truth in every joke. While this city is not a black hole where no white person ever goes, there is a high level of black mobility, people and culture that in the metro Atlanta area. This reality where blacks can spend a large portion of their child and adulthood without having substantial relationships with whites makes it seem like I-285, which is a highway used to help drivers circumnavigate the city of Atlanta, shields city residents from the white racism that exists in the larger country or the state of Georgia.

While I-285 may be a symbolic city marker that shields people in the city of Atlanta from racism, metro Atlanta is not completely devoid of it. Atlanta is still situated in a state that has historically been the site for much racial conflict in the United States. In Atlanta, some of my participants noted that as one moves outside of the shield of I-285, he/she is more likely to experience racism. Rachel, a middle-class woman lawyer, describes it this way:

It’s crazy how in metro Atlanta, where it’s so diverse, and then you can go 10 miles outside of Atlanta and you feel like you’re in the deep south….I always say the further out you go from Atlanta, the more in time you go. You go 10 miles, you’re about 10 years behind. You go about 30 miles, you’re probably about 30 years behind.

She explains this theory in a story she told while living in Stone Mountain, Ga:

We moved from there [Decatur] to Stone Mountain, and that was a totally different experience because I went from predominantly black areas to being the only black family, to having the neighbor that’s around the corner from our house hold KKK meetings in his front yard and burn crosses and all of that. That would sit outside in his front yard and yell at me and my brother and call us a nigger while we were walking to school.
Terra, a working-class black woman, explains it this way:

I always joke around and say that there is Atlanta and then there’s Georgia. But it is the South. It is a southern town. But there is a difference between inside Atlanta and outside of it.

After I asked her what the difference was, she replied:

Mindset, you see more confederate flags. Driving to Douglasville, you drive down this one little road and you see poor and white, trailer parks you see white people you see confederate flags….So I joke with my daughter and say, we’re not in Atlanta no more, we’re in Georgia. It’s a different mindset. You gone see more Trump signs. Racism is a little more obvious.

Although Rachel is a middle-class Atlanta native, and Terra is a working-class Atlanta transplant, they both observe the way Atlanta seems to be immune from white racism. However, the further a person goes from the perceived political, legal and social protection of Atlanta, the more likely it is that one will find the more explicit racism people typically attribute to life in the south.

Jordan, a 28-year-old Atlanta native tells a fascinating and sad story about the future effects of explicit racism:

I was brought up, raised in [South Carolina], around black people. So I was raised to be proud. My family is Geechee, so we had our own traditions, our own way of life. I really, until the age of 11, 10 1/2, I never really knew black people outside of [South Carolina]. When I came to Henry County, I will never forget…I was driving, and we were on, might have been 138, it might have been. I wasn’t good with direction and all that. I remember seeing a confederate, well it was two confederate flags, and they had a noose hanging from the tree, and it was a monkey hanging from the noose. First place we stopped to…we were just driving down the street. I'm looking at that like what is going on? I never saw anything like that in [South Carolina]. The first place we stopped was a Wal-Mart in Stockbridge. I saw all these confederate flags, and trucks. I was like "what in the world", where are we moving to?. That was first thing, before we even got to the house. I was scared.

At a young age, the image of a monkey hanging from a noose and confederate flags shaped Jordan’s racialized experiences. This instilled a fear in him that he never got over. Later
in the interview, I asked him if anyone or anything taught him to deal with racism and discrimination, and he states:

[I learned] On my own. I never pushed the limits. I knew how to test the reactions enough to get a good understanding, after growing up in a certain area. I didn’t want to get lynched. I still see that monkey in the back of my brain. I know if I try to run, they can catch me. They won't though.

Although Jordan saw this image over ten years ago, it still haunts him as an adult, and implanted a fear in him that regulates the way he handles racism. In the 19th and 20th centuries, lynching was a tool used to intimidate blacks from voting and secure their subordinate status in U.S. society. Lynching has not been popular since the onset of the Civil Rights movement. However, Jordan’s story shows that the fear or symbol of lynching is enough to cause him to carefully approach racist actions and inhibits him from strongly challenging racism. This story is an example of the generational and psychological trauma racism has on black people in the United States.

Because participants from Atlanta are less likely to report experiencing racism, some may argue that the city is a haven for blacks looking to escape racism. However, I argue that maybe the structural racism and racist policies governing Atlanta has been so hegemonic and successful at isolating the races, and blacks and whites have learned to live separate from each other for so long, that racial separation appears normal. An intersecting race and class analysis shows us that the predominately black underdeveloped and disinvested schools and neighborhoods in the southern part of the city are geographically separated from the bustling and free-flowing economic markets, business sectors and thriving schools located in the predominately white northern areas. According to the Atlanta native interviewees, racism played little role in their upbringing, however, it was clear that black Atlantans and white Atlantans did not live the same
way. When I asked how living in a big city affected one’s desire to move up in class status, Jermaine replied:

Yes. Exposure. The city has all these great things you can be exposed to which can be good and bad. But you see how broke you are when you go to the other side of town or you go to the Northside or you go to the Buckhead, Midtown area. Because you’re exposed to things you wouldn’t have ever gotten in your community, but then it shows just how out of touch your income and life is to people who are living a little better.

Later Jermaine mentions:

You see the value of different experiences as you get older and the shortcomings of your own life and race as you diversify your friends and your experiences. You see what life should be.

While Jermaine is proud of his race and community, he also begins to internalize the notion that the African American reality in Atlanta is not what it should be and concludes that there are shortcomings in his life and race after seeing how other people live. It’s important to note, that he is not speaking on a strictly material basis, but also to what he believes is the importance of diversity.

In terms of race, no Atlanta native mentioned structural forms of racism and systemic oppression along race and class lines when asked about racial memories or experiencing racism in this city. Instead, they responded that racism in Atlanta was little to non-existent, especially in comparison to other cities in the United States. Instead of being a city that is too busy too hate and a city that is immune to racism, I argue that Atlanta has perfected racism to the point that it exists where it is unrecognizable.

Atlanta offers much to African Americans who dream for a better life. While it is not a city that is completely free from racism, many people may argue that the level of overt traditional racism is not as high here as it is in other areas of the south and country at large. The exposure to successful black people and businesses is quite common in Atlanta, and individuals
who are privy to it on a regular basis often find this representation of African-American life inspiring. Conversely, the area(s) often described as the Black Mecca are present in upper to middle-class communities and neighborhoods. Many of these enclaves are located within the city and in the northern suburbs. However, the metro area of Atlanta reflects the type of traditional racism that many people recall seeing and experiencing in the old south. Working-class and even some middle-class blacks are more likely to live in these areas and experience racism, than inner-city middle-class blacks that live inside of the I-285 highway shield. In addition, the low-income and working-class blacks in the metro area are less likely to see the successful black leaders, prominent black businesses and the community of black intelligentsia that people speak of when describing the city as a Black Mecca. This lack of direct contact to inspiring leaders and opportunities can lead to an underclass that may be in a far worse position than the urban underclass found in Wilson’s (1987) work *The Truly Disadvantaged*. For the poor and disenfranchised, he writes that some can still have access to the social resources and opportunities often placed in the more urban areas of the inner city; however, the gentrified rural poor residents of metro Atlanta and suburban poverty are not only geographically separated from social resources (Oakley, Russell and Wilson 2008), but can be culturally disconnected from the inspiring and motivating economic and social capital that has historically helped to keep black people unified and progressive during times of racial unrest and social despair. In the next section, I go deeper into the differences between the working-class and middle-class experiences of black Atlanta and the class interactions and division that exist between the two groups.
7.5 Black Hierarchy--- What Kind of black am I? How high can I go?

People often view Atlanta as a city where black people can prosper academically, economically, politically and socially. However, it is important for us to ask the question, which black people can prosper in Atlanta. My research suggests that part of the black Atlanta experience is finding out where one fits along the spectrum of blackness, and how high one sits on the hierarchy of blackness in Atlanta. Where a person fits inside of “blackness” as well as the class spectrum can determine how much of the Black Mecca they can access. Monique sparked this idea in the following comment:

Atlanta is where I learned the significance of terms like Black Power, movements, those types of adjectives describing black. That’s when I started hearing terms like that when I moved here. Some of the issues that I had was because I wasn’t as educated as some were on some of these things…or the new term is “woke enough”… Living here was when I realized that black is not just black, that its levels to this thang. [Laughing] And its like, Damn, well, which black am I? [Laughing harder].. I mean I know I’m black but its foreal foreal levels to this thing. And naw I’m not necessarily wearing dashikis everyday and no I may not wear my natural hair and yes, I may put weave in my hair and if its of European fiber, its of European fiber. But to some people I don’t fit in with the right black group cause now I’m a different kind of black. So Atlanta was where I found out that there was levels, and I almost wanna say hierarchies to this, like Damn, I don’t really know which black am I? I am black, like all the way, but I don’t know which one? So even with dealing with the flat out racism racist stuff…I still struggle with identifying what my level of black is, cause I don’t know which one is going to accept me. Cause I don’t know where I need to be with certain ones.

Monique’s claim suggests that while there are some commonalities that may exist among different types of black people, blackness in Atlanta is much more complex. Levels of formal or informal education and hair texture can separate one black person from another. Knowledge of one’s history and black identity (otherwise termed as being woke) is imperative to understanding which groups, categories and communities one may fit in while living in Atlanta and the metro area. Being ignorant of one’s identity and the rules and negotiation patterns set up by the people involved can result in embarrassment and further isolation.
While some participants see this cornucopia of blackness in Atlanta as a negative characteristic of the city, others claim that it is also one reason why they enjoy living in the city of Atlanta or in the surrounding areas. When asked, what does Atlanta as a Black Mecca mean to you? Terra claims:

[It] means that anything is possible. In terms of you’re seeing people from Herman Russell to all the way to the top to the dope boy on the corner to the guy who’s gay and black from the Midwest who wasn’t accepted in his hometown can come here and flourish and be accepted for who he is. There’s a huge variety of people, type of black people, and opportunity…good and bad.

While Monique sees this question of, what kind of black am I? as a way of dividing and isolating black people, Terra claims that it is essential to the description of Atlanta’s title as a Black Mecca. This diversity in blackness is the reason why Atlanta is a haven for black people and she makes no mention of a hierarchy to this diversity of blackness.

Della shared the same sentiments as Terra:

The beauty of this large of a population is you have all your different groups. And you have boojo people and your whatever your earthy people, agriculture backyard people. Very diverse kind of black people. People can be who they want to be. Black women are natural and have been for a long time. I went to Chicago and one of my friends from there, she was like you have your natural people and your straight hair people. And they don’t mix. But in Atlanta, everybody is together,, and everybody mixes and mixes well. Not like you’re Afrocentric so you stay over here.

Unlike Monique, Della argues that the complexity of blackness exists in a safe and beautiful integrated fashion, which may not be common in other cities with a large black population. I think it is important to note that all three of these women represent different economic class groups and nuances within class groups, yet the class group was not an indicator of how they addressed the notion of the complexity of blackness in Atlanta. To participants across class groups, the question of, which black am I, can be a point of division among black Atlantans;
while, to other people across classes, the same question can be a defining piece in understanding the beauty of Atlanta and why it is described as the Black Mecca.

After understanding what type of black person one identifies with when moving to Atlanta, one can move to the second step of the equation by determining, which level along the hierarchy of blackness does one fall in. While financial resources and economic class offers many black Atlantans a higher level on the hierarchical scale, it is not the only measure of success in the city. In addition to money, black hierarchy in Atlanta depends on one’s relationship to an Atlanta academic institution and connection to older influential Atlanta residents and organizations.

Lawrence Graham (1999), author of the book *Our Kind of People*, states, “There is no major metropolitan area that has a better-organized black upper class than the city of Atlanta”. While there are other cities with a sizable black middle and upper class, Atlanta is unique in the way its elite black community functions. Graham states, “One childhood friend, who had relocated to Atlanta after practicing medicine in New York, told us, “You can make a million dollars a year and live in the nicest house in Buckhead, but you’ll never be accepted by the old black elite in this town”. These people will stare you in the face after you’ve told them of your great accomplishments,” explained our friend, “and the only thing that will matter to them is who in your family went to Morehouse, and for how many generations your family has lived in Atlanta”. Graham argues that in other cities, money can get you into certain significant places and social spaces; however, the material wealth and prestige is not as significant to the old black Atlanta guard. Heritage and tradition may mean much more to the black elite in the “Black Mecca” than it does to affluent blacks in other cities.
Although Lawrence Graham published this book in 1999, modern-day Atlanta functions in a similar way. Jameka’s description of her experience in this city is similar to what Graham describes in his book. Jameka speaks about how important a person’s family name is when interacting with Atlanta’s middle and upper class:

They’ll maintain that last name….So I definitely came across a lot of that in Atlanta from black people. Now, I’m used to that from [North Carolina] with white people. I’m used to that, but never with black people. I have never heard black people kind of carrying their last names as something so powerful almost. Even if it’s not wealth, it’s that last name, what that last name meant.

Like Graham, Jameka realized that heritage, name, family and tradition mean a lot to the old Atlanta guard, in addition to a person’s economic class. However, a person’s connection to a prominent black institution can also affect one’s position on the hierarchy. When asked how money changes the way society treats a black person, Jameka, a professor at a black college in Atlanta, states:

Because, again, it gives you access to certain places and spaces. It depends….If I’m a black person, and I’m a middle class black person, the way I speak, the way I present myself, I do, again, every white person wants to talk to me because I’m safe. On the flipside, the way I look, I got locks, I’m brown skinned, so when they see me their perception of me is negative. It’s like, shit, oh my God, I don’t want to talk to her. But then when I open my mouth I say what I do, then it’s, oh. Their perception of me changes. So sometimes class does help in terms of changing the perception of blackness….I do think that class changes how you’re approached by white people in general…but at the end of the day you’re still black. Once I close my mouth, I’m still black….Okay, so blacks are like shit or below shit. If you are middle-class black you might be treated like the stuff on top the shit. You’re still treated like shit. You can still smell the shit, but it’s a little bit above – you’re treated a little bit better, but at the end of the day you’re still black.

Even though Jameka admits that she does not make the kind of money that many people in her class group would expect her to make, her education and job position as a professor at a HBCU in Atlanta allows her to interact with middle-class people. However, other people without the education or position making the same amount of money as her, may ignored by many middle-
class black Atlantans. Therefore, being associated with a black college in Atlanta is very important to the black hierarchy in this city. In some instances, it can be more beneficial than financial resources or class status. To whites and blacks, her education and affiliation with a prominent HBCU in Atlanta allows her to sit on a level of black hierarchy that otherwise may not occur if she only exposed her financial status. She later claims:

I definitely have more interactions with middle class, upper middle class, because of what I do. Because I’m a professor. Because I’m getting a doctorate. There are certain people I just become in contact with, right?

Rea’s experience also describes Graham’s black hierarchy in Atlanta and the fact that, in addition to class, educational affiliation and Atlanta connections are very important when assessing where one falls in the black hierarchical frame in Atlanta:

I work a lot with old Atlanta guard type of folks and sometimes they are not as approachable, if you don’t have ties to Atlanta or the AUC or school in Atlanta. Sometimes they don’t wanna talk to you. Fortunately, I have ties to the AUC, so that helps me, but I find that there is that bougie element to tapping into old Atlanta. But I don’t know if that’s so different to other major cities with longstanding black populations.

Rea has the privilege of interacting with Atlantans who may sit on a higher level of the black hierarchical ladder because of her connection to the Atlanta University Center. She also mentions that without having ties to Atlanta (meaning living in Atlanta or being close to important people or institutions in Atlanta), it can be difficult to interact with and maybe even reach a certain level on the ladder of black hierarchy.

Not only does Atlanta have a high concentration of blacks in the city, which is one reason why it black people see it as a Black Mecca, but the type of black people that inhabit the areas are very diverse. This diversity can bring about division in the black community, while others see it as a positive attribute to Atlanta culture. However, these differences are not only lateral,
but vertical. There is a certain hierarchy that exists among blacks in Atlanta. While class plays a major role in how high one can go on this hierarchy, educational affiliation and ties to Atlanta can also dictate what kind of black person you are, and how high you are able to go in Atlanta’s black hierarchy.

### 7.6 Perceptions of Atlanta as a Black Mecca

“If you hang out with me for too long, I’ll brainwash you into believing in yourself and knowing you can achieve anything”. -Unknown-

Scholarly literature on race and class in Atlanta shows the economic inequality that exists in the city and its surrounding areas (Djoquist 2000). However, little research analyzes the narratives that support these numerical findings and the experiences of the individuals that are victims of the city’s class divide. Based on my survey of the research literature, I hypothesized that middle-class blacks would be more likely to see Atlanta as a Black Mecca, while working-class blacks would not. However, my data shows a pattern that is much more noteworthy.

Instead of perceptions of Atlanta as a Black Mecca being similar across class groups, I found that class was not the most important factor, but place of birth and length of time in the city played a much more significant role in the respondents’ perceptions of Atlanta as a Black Mecca. While Atlanta transplants across classes were more likely to claim that the title Black Mecca is an accurate depiction of Atlanta, Atlanta natives across class groups were more likely to argue that the title of a Black Mecca is a myth to Atlanta residents.

#### 7.6.1 Atlanta Transplants: The City As A Mecca

I explained to each respondent that answered the question about Atlanta as a Black Mecca, that the Black Mecca title alluded to the idea that black people are able to move to Atlanta, and because of the educational, political leadership, business opportunities and large black population, it is easier to become part of the growing black middle class than it is in other
cities. The respondents were then asked whether that description about the Black Mecca was a myth, or an accurate portrayal of Atlanta. Atlanta transplants were more likely than Atlanta natives to see the Black Mecca title as an accurate description of Atlanta. Participants who viewed Atlanta as a Black Mecca and a place where people can achieve a higher-class status, often attributed success to personal motivation and individual positive characteristics. When I asked Alma, a middle-class woman from Mississippi, if Atlanta as a Black Mecca was an accurate description of the city, she replied:

I think personally, I’ve done well by being here and I try to encourage other people that you can do it as well. It’s possible. I would say that’s accurate and it can be done depending on the person. I think this is…yeah this is a good place not to say it can’t be done anywhere else. But I do think it’s a good place for growth.

Kenyatta, a 23-year-old middle-class graduate student from Warner Robbins Georgia, with a working-class income, answered the question this way:

That’s definitely accurate…I moved here after graduation because of the opportunities. A lot of people come here for rap careers even though they can’t rap. Some come for singing. People move here to get up and I feel like the majority of people accomplish that. My aunt moved here years ago and started out at a temp company and now she making good money with AT&T. So I feel like Atlanta is kinda that stepping stone where you can achieve or do things you never thought you could do or make a better life for yourself….I feel like the Black Mecca is true. You can get places. Me moving to Atlanta to go to [a university] and meeting the friends I have, to getting a decent paying job to now, going to graduate school, I wouldn’t have gotten there being in [city in Georgia]. Atlanta was that stepping stone for me. I did it, my aunt did it and other people can and are doing it to.

Both previous respondents claimed that if a person worked hard enough in Atlanta, then they could achieve middle-class status. They argue that with all the people, opportunities and networks here, the resources are available for everyone to succeed. There was no mention of the impoverished conditions that keep many Atlantans from gaining access to those networks, the systemic levels of oppression such as gentrification, unequal access to education and a limited transit system that make it difficult to take advantage of the opportunities that Atlanta has to
offer. In addition, both respondents were already middle-class and had access to a middle-class lifestyle before moving to Atlanta. If a person is already middle class, then it may be easier to maintain that class status or see Atlanta as an opportunity for growth than a low-income black person.

When I asked Christina, a middle-class woman from Michigan, what does Atlanta as a Black Mecca mean to her, she replied, “That there are progressive, successful black people here who don’t have to take and swallow white people bullshit like they do in other parts of the country”. She perceived the Black Mecca as a place where a black person is free from white people’s racism. After I provided my explanation and asked her if that was accurate or a myth, she replied, “Absolutely. Because there are enough black people in power here who own their own businesses. You got 100 black men. This is why we moved to Atlanta”. The economic advancement of the black middle class and black business districts provide minorities of African descent with enough resources and networks to achieve social mobility.

Giselle, an Atlanta transplant from Florida, found a meme on social media that she feels accurately describes Atlanta and its title as a Black Mecca. The meme states, “If you hang out with me for too long, I will brainwash you into believing in yourself and knowing you can achieve anything”. According to Giselle, Atlanta in all of its networks, glitz, glamour, and prestige, can inspire people in this city, and if you stay here long enough, the city can encourage you to achieve and match the greatness of itself:

That I believe is the complete consensus of Atlanta. You can most definitely do anything and I think a lot of times its mindset… I think that Atlanta, that mentality of making people know that they can do anything they can achieve anything you just have to put in the work. You have to get into the right networks and stay focused. I mean, I’m sure it’s a lot of people who come here and don’t make it. But what did you do in the process? Did you get with the right people? Did you stay true to what you said you were gonna do? Did you save your money, or did you just party hard and were you in the strip club every other weekend?
Giselle argues that you can do anything you want in Atlanta, because the city has been set up that way. Therefore, if a person is not successful, then she/he should do some introspection to see if they have done everything they were supposed to do to achieve their goals. If a person did not “make it,” it was probably because they partied and did not take advantage of the city’s opportunities and tap into the networks necessary to be successful. Using data from the previous section on the black hierarchy, I see that it is difficult to talk to the right people, or tap into the right networks, if you are not already middle class and have those connections in the first place. Giselle’s claim does not take into account the fact that class plays a role in social mobility.

Terra, an Atlanta transplant like Giselle, also sees Atlanta as a Black Mecca, and argues that if a person is not successful, then the responsibility is on that individual:

I think it’s accurate [Atlanta as a Black Mecca], but it’s not gone happen if you sit and wait for it to fall out the sky. You got to make it happen. There are a million networks for you to get connected with. Interns of industry and people. It’s here. But you got to get it.

According to Terra, hard work and connecting with the right people will allow a person to make it in Atlanta and move up. Therefore, if a person does not make it, then it means that they did not work hard enough to make sure that they were in the right circles. Like Giselle, she does not consider the way class plays into the way a person has access to these networks. Many times, internships require a person to work for free. Working without pay is a sacrifice person may be able to make, but a working-class or poor person may not have the resources or time to work for no compensation. Carver, an Atlanta transplant from Tennessee, makes the same argument in his response to the same question:

I think it’s pretty accurate. I think it’s doable [or] possible anywhere. But you’re probably, in my mind, you would get more support here because there is an area or cluster of people that are doing well that may be willing to help you if you have the right plan or business that you’re trying to promote or develop.
Carver, Giselle, and Terra, who are all Atlanta transplants that vary in class, gender and place of birth, argue the same point, that one can experience socioeconomic mobility in the “Black Mecca” if they work hard and tap into the right networks.

7.6.2 Atlanta Transplants: The City as a Mecca to some

Most Atlanta transplants who saw Atlanta as a Black Mecca believed that if you work hard enough, you can achieve economic success; however, there are still other Atlanta transplants who qualify Atlanta’s Black Mecca title. While they can accept the city’s reputation, they also recognize the limitations placed on the poor and working class in the city. Ressy, a middle-class woman from Florida states:

I feel like it [Atlanta as a Black Mecca] means that this is where you can come, and you can be whoever you want to be. You can be as successful as you want to be. Now, the flipside of that is I know that it’s not like that for all of us in this city, and if you do spend any time at the West End or off Cleveland, I mean, you’ll see that plain as day. So, the gap, it’s not just a white and black gap, it’s a gap between black people of different socioeconomic status. There’s a gap there. It’s a mecca for some. It’s a mecca for some because there are a lot of people who come here from all over because they hear that, and they think this is where I’m going to be okay, and my kids are going to be okay, and it doesn’t pan out for them, you know….Yes, and realizing that Atlanta with all of its Black Mecca qualities is not like that for everyone.

Ressy realizes that the resources and benefits tied to living in and around Atlanta mainly exist for people who are already economically advantaged. When Ressy says it’s not a Mecca for everyone, she is pointing out the class inequality and income disparities that exist between and within racial groups. Rea, a middle-class transplant from Michigan shared similar sentiments when asked if she felt like moving up in class is easier in Atlanta than other cities, due to its Black Mecca qualities:

I think it’s kinda accurate. It’s not accurate for everybody…I don’t think it means necessarily I mean you can get exposure, groups and opportunities that can be of a higher echelon. But I mean everybody can’t. There is still a ceiling and that’s kinda like an old Atlanta guard….But I feel like Atlanta is a mecca because you can do a lot of things.
Whether you’re not moving to economic classes, I can’t say that’s the case. I think some people do. But then I think there is still a cap for some people. I think it depends on your ambition and drive. If you have a low drive in one city and you come to Atlanta and have a low drive its gone be what it is.

Rea also recognizes that Atlanta can be a Black Mecca, but only for a select group of people. She perceived it as a Black Mecca for people who can access the opportunities and groups of a higher echelon. She recognizes that the glass ceiling may exist. However, she attributes lack of success to poor ambition and drive. She does not focus on the structural impediments of poor education, concentrated poverty, and racism that make it extremely difficult to achieve socioeconomic mobility. While she calls attention to the class disparities that may exist in the city, she is more vocal about agency and a person’s internal ambition and its relation to lack of success, than the structural and social impediments that make it difficult for poor and working-class people to achieve upward mobility.

Della, a middle-class woman from Michigan, also sees Atlanta as a Black Mecca for some:

With the lower income, I think it’s harder than what you’re saying. I think it’s possible. Like I think Maynard Jackson and what he did with contracts and stuff like that, that was helpful for low income and assuming they went to black businesses that hired people from all. I think it could be better.

This participant admits that while Atlanta is the Black Mecca, the city can do much better about providing opportunities to low-income residents and ensuring that exposure, education, policy, economic advancement, and cultural identity trickles down to the more economically disadvantaged group. Unlike Rea, Della recognizes that many of the problems facing the poor and working class are not due to lack of motivation, but lack of effort from people in power to help level the playing field for success.
Monique, an Atlanta transplant from Alabama, was one of the few transplants to strongly critique the idea of Atlanta as a Black Mecca:

I think that’s a strong term to use to describe Atlanta. I think Atlanta has a long way to go before it can be considered a mecca. When I think about Mecca, I think about the Muslim community, cause they go to Mecca and I know it’s a type of gathering like holy gathering that they do. I just think that that’s too great of a term to describe Atlanta, because I think Atlanta is too far from being the Mecca that it could be. Atlanta is still too divided before it could even be considered a Mecca if you ask me. I mean, you have had a black mayor for as long as I can remember, and I done been here for six years…and you still got people sleeping on the streets and eating out of trash cans. No this is not a mecca. We have way too many people of power and there’s way too much black money. The TI’s the Futures, the Julio Joneses and all these other folks. You got all this up in here and Atlanta is still as poverty stricken as it is, so no, it’s not quite a mecca. It’s a little melting pot for brown people, nice little fondue [laughing]. A nice little chocolate fountain where you can dip your little cup in and get you some nice chocolate. So it’s a nice fondue machine. Mecca? Naw, not yet.

When I asked Monique if it easier to move up from the poor or working class to the middle class because of the black businesses, education and networks that exist in the city, she responded in this way:

Do you know any of em? If you don’t know any of em then, no you not. Cause you have to be in a certain…cause in Atlanta, its levels to blackness in Atlanta…it depends on the social class that you’re accepted into.

Monique strongly disagrees with the Black Mecca title and, after only six years in Atlanta, concludes that one can move up in class if they are accepted into certain circles. Getting into those circles is not as easy as some may make it seem. According to Monique, the hierarchy of blackness, which in many ways is based on class, is the determining factor to how well a person can become connected to the networks of Atlanta that can help lead to social mobility.

Renee is another transplant who believed Atlanta was the Black Mecca when she moved here in the late 90s and early 2000’s, but after living here for a large part of her adult life, she is starting to see the city a little differently:
I think that’s accurate [Atlanta as a Black Mecca]. For some. It’s accurate for my family, the three of us, is a perfect example of that. For me, it’s hard. I don’t fit in everywhere. I get in some places and get pushed out when I don’t conform. I buck the system. In the south, being a person like that doesn’t work…. Atlanta is definitely a place where people can come and make it. [she also states] Here in Atlanta, this shit is not the Black Mecca no more. It is moving to the place where it is changing. Black people in business we should patronize them to hold on. In my lifetime, there will be a white mayor in Atlanta.

Renee’s perception about Atlanta changes throughout the interview. Sometimes she sees it as a Black Mecca and sometimes she does not. This is an example of the complicated relationship many black people have with the city. Most Atlanta transplants see Atlanta as a Black Mecca because they have been able to benefit from the black Meccanisms of the city. However, some qualify the statement when recognizing how Atlanta has changed over the years and the class division, gentrification and inequality that exists in the city and metro area.

7.6.3 Atlanta natives: Black Mecca Title as a Myth

Most Atlanta transplants claimed that Atlanta as a Black Mecca was an accurate description of the city, however, Atlanta natives and participants who spent most of their lives here were less likely than Atlanta transplants to views the title as an accurate description of the city. Tommy, a working-class male and native of metro Atlanta had this to say about the Black Mecca title:

Man, I don’t know. I’m from here and don’t see it. Maybe it's like they say, a prophet is not received in his own home. I do music management, and I have to go to outside towns to do shows, because there are like eight million people here now, and it's saturated. If you are coming from somewhere else maybe… but if you are here, you have to go somewhere else, then come back. You have to go out and get respect, then come back…. So, it's not easy to move up in Atlanta.

Tommy sees the city as a place that does not value its own talent and can take its human capital for granted because of the large population that exists here. The large black population is the reason why some see Atlanta as a Black Mecca, but because of the overwhelming populace, Tommy believes the city does not place value on its own people and what they contribute to the
culture of the city. The oversaturation of talent, people and entertainment options in the city can lead many people to overlook up and coming artists. Alexuce, a working-class woman who was born in Jamaica but grew up in Atlanta, admits that the city is special because you have black doctors here, and that is not normal in other places. However, she also had this to say about its “Black Mecca” title:

I think that might be a myth. It’s not easy to move up in class. Cause its more people like you there. It’s more beneficial to know that you can do it. But I don’t think its way easier to do that than anywhere else. I just think it’s possible….you see all these examples and so it makes you wanna do it more, but it’s not necessarily easier to actually move up.

Later she states:

Cause I feel like most people who are middle class come from those types of families already and so we do a good job of helping the middle-class people continue to stay middle class. Not leave there but stay there. And we don’t really help the ones that wanna get out of their situation altogether. And people who work with the homeless population complain all the time about how they don’t really have the means to help them and the city’s not really helping them. They are more concerned with having them not be outside looking homeless instead of trying to fix the situation. So, Atlanta doesn’t do a good job of helping people who are already downtrodden and helping them move up. That’s not something Atlanta really focuses on.

Atlanta leaders, networks and institutions provides many opportunities to people who are already middle class, to stay middle class. Atlanta’s black colleges, internships, fraternities, sororities and networks are all beneficial to people who can afford the tuition, unpaid work and membership fees. However, if a person does not already have those resources available, then utilizing those institutions to help increase your opportunities will be more difficult than a privileged person with those financial resources.

Alexuce’s response is noteworthy because it suggests that while Atlanta is a positive place for black people, sometimes it only functions as a cultural symbol and model for black progress. Seeing so many examples of successful black people can give a person the drive and
inspiration to work hard. However, she argues that the same successful black people that represent the city of Atlanta in the political and economic arena do very little to help the disadvantaged achieve economic mobility.

I asked Jermaine, a middle-class Atlanta native, if it being easier to move up in class status in Atlanta based on its Black Mecca qualities was accurate or a myth. He replied:

It’s become a myth. The description is very accurate and on point, but it doesn’t relate to truth. You come here poor, you’re gonna be poor. You come here looking for this this and this, its gonna take you longer than you expected to get there. The doors aren’t as open as people make it seem.

Unless a person is already in school, have a business, or have connections, the opportunities for the poor and working poor are slimmer. The likelihood of a person being poor and staying poor in Atlanta appears to be higher than what many people would like to believe.

Jermaine claims that experiencing socioeconomic mobility is not as easy as people assume it is, and Alexue argues that the reasons may be systemic and due to city policies, that put more of an emphasis on city growth and less on the poor and homeless population. However, other participants argue that the internalized racist attitudes exhibited by the black middle class is the reason why Atlanta is not the “Black Mecca”. Rachel, a middle-class Atlanta native, had this to say about why she thinks the “Black Mecca” title is a myth:

The reason I think it’s a myth is because at the same time, I feel like unfortunately black people have a crab in the barrel mentality, so it’s like if I’m succeeding – I’m not going to say all of them because I don’t, but they have the mentality of, if I’m doing well I don’t want to help you because if I help you too much then you might surpass me, or you might do better than me, so I’m going to only help a little bit….I think that kind of hinders the whole idea of black people able to move up successfully….The number of black people in executive jobs or higher paid jobs are still ridiculously lower than Caucasians, so they still have the majority when it comes to that. So, I think that it gives that false image that maybe one or two people you know have moved here and did really well, but for those one to two, it’s probably about a thousand that are doing really bad.
Rachel’s reason why the idea of Atlanta as a Black Mecca is a myth is twofold. She argues that the inaccuracy is due to internalized racism among blacks and an exaggeration of the professional class. Rachel claims that many of the more affluent black people in Atlanta do not lend a helping hand to those in need, thus contributing to the number of black people who are victims of the underclass. She states that the constant pulling down of black people by other black people is what keeps a large part of the black population from being able to achieve economic and social success. Like some of the Atlanta transplant participants, Rachel does not address the structural implications that explain why she believes Atlanta is not a “Black Mecca” and places responsibility on systemic issues like poverty, poor education, and wealth inequality that favor whites. Instead, she places the responsibility of uplifting of the rest of the race on the lack of sensitivity and care shown by the more privileged black folks in Atlanta. In addition, she sees that as an Atlanta native, she has witnessed both sides of the “Black Mecca” coin and sees that for every one or two successful people the media likes to portray about Atlanta, there are a plethora of poor people that are overlooked when discussing the city of Atlanta. This false representation is what keeps people believing in the “Black Mecca” title, moving here in search of opportunity only to find that the path to success may come with racism and classism; all of which may make it difficult for a person to achieve their goal.

Kelsey Nordstrom, a middle-class doctor and native of Atlanta, had this to say about Atlanta as a Black Mecca:

I think that’s a marketing ploy for people to come here who aren’t from here. And then you come here and you have an expectation, and I think that we’ve become this façade. This Hollywood reality drama-filled looking city when it comes to black people. Now, if you’re talking about the city as a whole, just Atlanta without the Black Mecca piece, then it’s an attractive thing. There are opportunities here. There are opportunities to branch out. If you’re an entrepreneur, there is a lot of opportunities. If you’re in certain fields, it’s a great place to be. And the cost of living compared to other places is cheaper, like a New York or what have you, San Francisco or even a DC right now. It’s cheaper.
But the whole Black Mecca piece. I think when it first started, it was the promise of, you can come here and be anything you want. I think it’s a joke now.

Kelsey does believe that there are opportunities here; however, with all these amenities and attractions, she still concludes that the Black Mecca is a joke and a façade. Like Monique, Kelsey claims Atlanta can be beneficial if you are in “certain” fields or maybe an entrepreneur. However, there is a large class divide that makes it difficult for people who are not in those “certain” fields or a part of “certain” networks to achieve the mobility necessary to improve one’s class status.

Mercy Ali, an 84-year-old working-class woman from Everton Georgia, was not born here, but spent more than 50 years of her life in Atlanta. Like the Atlanta natives, she also recognized that Atlanta as a Black Mecca was a myth. When asked if she felt Atlanta was a Black Mecca, she states, “Hell no! It might be, but we aint benefitting from it. It’s here but they done tore down all the projects”. According to Mercy Ali, gentrification and the politicians that allow for the displacement of the poor and working-class black residents is the central reason why this notion of Atlanta as a Black Mecca is a myth. While she admits that it people perceive it as a Black Mecca, a majority of the black people are not benefitting from it; therefore, it is not a Black Mecca to those who can’t afford to reap the rewards from the city.

7.7 Conclusion

After assessing the history of Atlanta and the way the city has developed in the last half of the twentieth century, it is easy to see why people call Atlanta the Black Mecca—a place where black people can live outside of the white gaze and have a higher level of self-determination, self-government, and economic independence than what may exist in other cities. In fact, this level of progress is emotional to some blacks that have experienced multiple levels of oppression, and the city is an example to the rest of our very racially divided nation on what
working together across racial lines can look like. While the country should laud Atlanta’s social advancement as a southern city, the class division, systemic oppression, and c(g)lass ceiling (class and glass ceiling) that exists in the city should not go unobserved. Atlanta transplants may not see or understand the depth of these issues, and still see Atlanta as the Black Mecca that drew them to the city in the first place. There are some Atlanta transplants who openly recognize the inequalities in Atlanta along class lines, yet still describe the city of Atlanta as a Black Mecca. However, Atlanta natives and those who have spent most of their lives in the city are more critical of the Black Mecca title than Atlanta transplants. They are more likely to recognize the structural impediments and class divisions that keep people of color at a disadvantage, even in a predominately black populated and controlled city. In the next two sections, I examine the Black Meccanisms (higher educational institutions, black-owned businesses, and politics), the perceptions of these Meccanisms and how they can create, reinforce and help combat some of the inequality issues in metro Atlanta. Because of the vast amount of data on the perception of higher educational institutions in the city, specifically the Atlanta University Center (AUC), I had to give its analysis a separate chapter.
8 BLACK MECCANISMS: THE ATLANTA UNIVERSITY CENTER

8.1 Higher Ground

The Atlanta University Center has a rich history of educational advancement and social justice in the Atlanta area. Its impact has helped create some of the world’s most impactful human rights leaders, creatives, business people and thinkers. In the present-day, it continues to make an indelible mark on all its students and members of the larger Atlanta community. Onlookers who may not have attended school in the AUC look at its institutions as a place of pride and hope. Because of the AUC and its educational impact on the city of Atlanta, it has become a key Black Meccanisms that makes Atlanta a haven for black people all over the world.

In this chapter, I describe the Atlanta University Center as an agent for change as well as an institution that can reinforce intraracial class tensions. While this syndicate of black intelligentsia remains a symbol of hope for black people on and off its sacred grounds, this chapter addresses the deeper concerns of division that exists between the institutions and how that discord can spill over into the larger Atlanta community. Like the city of Atlanta, the AUC can sometimes remain a symbol of black progress with little processes to ensure that its impact and influence reaches the more disenfranchised parts of the city.

8.2 Fertile Ground for Greatness

Across class groups and social identities, respondents provided a generally positive reaction to the Atlanta University Center and its position as a hub for black education. When asked about Atlanta, these institutions and how it affects the way the participants view themselves and the larger black community, Rea had this to say:

Like even talking about it now, I feel warm…I came here to go to Spelman so that is my fondest memory [of Atlanta]. Being at Spelman and being in the Atlanta University Center. Then coming back to work here at what I’ve always said is my dream job…. being in the AUC has really been wonderful…. There is no place like this. There is no place where you have at this moment four, but five when I was in school Morris Brown,
institutions and Morehouse School of Medicine to six, where you experience this higher education of young black people wanting to learn, grow, develop, network and see others do well, all together. We’re having fun. We’re studious. We’re serious and doing the damn thing…. I will say further that as I have moved through my career and lived in other places, New York, Nashville, every time I say I went to Spelman, people are “ah I know about Spelman. That’s a great school”. People of all different races. So, I feel like this environment has produced so many great people that were well known and respected around the world. So, I have that pride here and other people experienced it and recognized it and how great it was and I continue to give back by working in this arena and monetarily. So, there’s no place like this.

As a graduate and employee of the AUC, Rea has been involved in the institutions on multiple levels and has had an overwhelmingly positive experience. Rea admires the school she attended and has even stated that her position in the AUC is her dream job. She also points out that the impact and importance of the AUC is not specific to the black community, but people of all races and all over the country recognize its reputation and respect its legacy.

Della, a former student of Spelman, states:

I guess in Atlanta, it makes you feel part of a larger black community because it’s so many AUC alum in Atlanta. So many HBCUs here and it’s almost like a special club, not in a exclusive, bad way but a good way. It makes me feel like a product of an Atlanta institution or otherwise I would be an outsider. I was educated here in what I feel like was a prestigious school.

Della moved to Atlanta from Michigan, and the AUC allowed her to transition into the larger Atlanta culture and be part of an historical school and group of people that she may not have otherwise encountered. She is careful not to make the Atlanta University Center appear as if it is an exclusive club; however, there are networks and opportunities specifically available to those who attend their institutions.

Ressy, a former Spelman student and Atlanta transplant from Florida, recalls:

In terms of black professionals and, you know, going to Spelman everybody’s dad was a doctor or owned something or their mom was a – you know, there was a lot of that, and I can’t say that about [city in Florida]…So that was pretty jaw dropping when I first got to Atlanta, to see the kind of money that families had that looked like me.
Mick is a 37-year-old middle class Atlanta transplant from Arkansas. He graduated from Morehouse and is working on his Ed.D. Mick also spoke about his experience in the AUC:

   Coming to Atlanta to go to college for me, was my first experience, large scale, having people of color all in one place. You could see them doing it. That used to be my conversation.

Not only did the AUC provide Ressy and Mick with an education, but introduced them to an aspect of black life that they had not witnessed before. Through this system of institutions, Ressy encountered business owners and people practicing self-determination, a concept people read about in books but may not see played out in their daily lives. In addition to the exposure of Atlanta’s successful black middle-class, Ressy also experienced a personal cultural transformation as a student in the AUC:

   I feel like I’ve learned so much about being black just from going to Spelman and just being who I am and around all the kinds of people I am because I did not have any black family except my dad. My dad’s mom passed when we were really young. He didn’t have any siblings. We didn’t know any of his family.

Being a mixed-race student in Atlanta who did not know a lot about the black side of her family, Spelman College taught her who she was as a black woman and gave her a sense of cultural identity.

   For many Atlanta transplants, attending school in the AUC plays a major role in their first introduction to life in Atlanta. Terra recalls:

     My growing up in Atlanta was Spelman…. It’s the reason I came here. I came here to go to Spelman. My parents took us on a black college tour. I fell in love with Spelman. My brother fell in love with Morehouse and that’s why I came here. Of all the schools that I visited, I felt it was the cream of the crop. I also saw Tennessee State, Wilberforce, Central State, Clark, Morris Brown, and it truly had the Ivy League. It was the only school I applied to and I probably could’ve gotten in anywhere.

Like Rea, Spelman spellbound Terra. Years after graduation, her experiences there continues to have a strong impact on her life today.
Most of the participants that attended a school in the AUC had a generally positive experience. While it was not likely that any participant would have an overall negative perception of any institution in the Atlanta University Center, Rachel, a former student of Spelman, argued that she hated her time at the HBCU. Rachel states:

Okay, so little known fact. I went to Spelman for one semester. Hated it. Hated it with a passion…. It wasn’t for me….okay, so I grew up like everyone watching The Cosby Show and watching Different World. I was like, it was going to be like Different World. It’s going to be great. Man, I went there. I was like, why am I here? I hate it….at the time they didn’t offer a pre-law program, so that was the first thing. Because they were like, well we’re a liberal arts school. I’m like, so you better liberal some pre-law. I was just like, okay, so that was the first strike….it was just like I felt like I was going in a fashion show every day….People were coming in (class) like they were really about to go to the club. Dresses, six-inch heels, weaves on point. I’m like, okay, so am I the only one that’s really here for an education….I mean, some people like my best friend, he had a great experience at Morehouse. He loved Morehouse.

While Rachel’s friend loved his time in the AUC, she did not. There are legitimate reasons why a person may or may not fit in at a specific institution; however, I argue that there were some cultural differences Rachel falsely applied to “lack of motivation” and, thus led to a negative perception of the people at the institution. Historically, Spelman is a school that has largely attracted middle class blacks. Throughout this history of the institution, alumni and school policy have encouraged the women students to dress up for class. There are even historical references that speak to the fashion of Spelman College and how some students have resisted it by adopting the rebellious and political styles of the larger black community (Craig 2002).

Zoharrah Simmons was a Spelman College student in the 1960s and a member of the organization SNCC, which Stokley Carmichael who phrased the term “Black Power” led out in. Simmons embraced the rebellious style of the day and wore her hair in an afro while on campus. Later, she was called to the dean’s office and was told that “a Spelman woman is supposed to look….well groomed”. Other students would question her decision and label her a disgrace.
Maxine Craig (2002) states, “Simmons…transgressed norms of femininity as well as expectations about the appearance of middle-class black women (p. 134)”.

The history of Spelman College has always included an interesting and sometimes tense relationship between, education, fashion, class, and politics. However, Rachel attended a predominately white high school, where the casual look may have been more accepted in the classroom. Coming to Spelman, Rachel assumed that by dressing up to attend class, the women students were placing more value on their looks than their education, when, many of the students may have been dressing up because they valued their education and the traditions associated with attending Spelman.

Kelsey Nordstrom, a former student and graduate of Morehouse School of Medicine, also saw the systems of schools as a strong place for a quality education. However, when the media reports a negative story about a black school, both blacks and whites, can apply that description to other black colleges. However, the public allows white schools to make mistakes and bad decisions in isolation, without those maladies affecting the way they view all white schools. This extra burden placed on the HBCU having to represent all black schools is racialized. Kelsey praises the old AUC for its work in black education, and sees post-closing of Morris Brown as the time where the AUC began to stray off the path of its strong legacy:

I think it (AUC) was more prominent and effective in the 70s and 80s and early 90s, before things got out of control. Before Morris Brown closed, and it seemed like people just wanted to cast that whole shadow over the entire HBCU community or AUC. Some of the things that have happened that have made the news even over at Morehouse. When something happens with one university, it seems to cast a shadow over all of them. And that’s unfortunate because those are some really strong schools with some very good endowments and great faculty and some really strong programs. I taught at Spelman. I graduated from Morehouse School of Medicine, so I’ve been there, so I know what’s going on. I know the potential that’s there. I know the faculties who are there who put their hearts into it. Growing up, you know that it’s there.
According to Kelsey, the AUC has very strong schools, but the negative media attention at other black colleges/universities and the perceived better legacy of the schools that existed in the 1970s, 80s and 90s can cause blacks and whites to overlook those positive characteristics.

While many of my participants had overwhelmingly positive remarks about the AUC, one may expect former students, alums and employees of the institutions present their school in a positive light. However, non-affiliates of the Atlanta University Center also spoke optimistically about the schools and what they mean to the black community. Glen did not attend any schools in the Atlanta University Center, but when asked about his feelings towards the school he says this about the students, “definitely it inspires you to do better and support the people going to the school or….you wanna do what you can to help them out”. Tommy, a 30-year-old male from Scottsdale, stated,

My wife went to Fort Valley - it's not Atlanta, but an HBCU….I wish I had been apart of it, because it is a tight network. My wife has crazy friends. Spelman, Morehouse, when someone makes it, they are going to look out for each other. Especially, the fraternities and sororities. My wife, she is a Delta. Just that community. I wish I would have been a part. That affected me.

Tommy sees firsthand the benefits that come from attending one, specifically one of the black colleges in Atlanta. Tommy can attest to the networks, friends and connections that Della spoke about in her response. He was not the only person to have a desire to attend a black college, or one of the higher educational institutions in Atlanta. Kennyshia, a graduate student in metro Atlanta, also stated that she wished she would have attended an HBCU:

I was supposed to go to Clark, but I went to [an historically white institution]. But now looking back I wish I would’ve done one year at an HBCU. Going to the phase to freshman year to [my university] to my junior year in college, I just felt like I was low with race and being who I was, so I felt like being around people who understood that and going through the same thing and having that cultural home would’ve made a big difference….walking through an HBCU campus and feeling like you at grandma house is different from a diverse campus. I feel like the perspective I would’ve gained from an
It is evident that while Kennyshia values her undergraduate experience, she feels like she missed out on some benefits by not attending an HBCU. She claims that attending a black college would have helped her achieve academic success, as well as learn more about she was as a black woman. As she approached the end of her undergraduate experience, she realized that she was not satisfied with how much she knew about race. Cultural knowledge was just as valuable to her as academics and attending a black college would have not only fulfilled that, but would have also given her a sense of comfort and stability—an environment that would remind her of her Grandma’s House.

The schools inside of the Atlanta University Center maintain friendly rivalries with other black colleges in the United States. Christina attended one of those rival schools. As a graduate of Howard University, she prefers her alma mater over the institutions in Atlanta. However, she has a deep level of respect for the institutions in the Atlanta University Center:

I went to Howard. So, it’s like, “oh, Morehouse, that’s so cute. Oh, Spelman, you went to Spelman”. I went to Howard, right? So, I already have that. I respect that. I respect that it’s here. I told Chuck [her son]…you could go to Georgia Tech. You could go to Morehouse, and you could live right down in the basement and come and go as you want to. I mean, it’s a viable option and I certainly respect the education and everything that they’re doing, Morris Brown and all of it, right? But I’m a Howard grad, sorry. My shirts are either Obama shirts, Howard, or vegan. Those are the only three kind of T-shirts I wear. I know.

Christina maintains loyalty to her black college in Washington D.C. However, she later realizes how important the AUC is and will be to her son. Later, she even states that she wants her son to interact with students from Morehouse College.

My husband, [her son’s] dad, passed away seven, almost eight, years ago. And then my dad died in December. So, we are, it’s just the two of us, and I know that he needs more black male role models. You see I’m not even unpacked, but one of the things on my list is to find a couple of Morehouse students…who will come over, be his manny, take him
out, do things with him. He don’t like to comb his hair. He don’t like to brush his teeth. 
He’s a typical 12-year-old boy, but I can’t teach him everything he needs to know, and I 
am not parading a whole bunch of men in front of him while I find a new love if one is 
even out there for me, right? So, I guess that’s a way that the AUC is impacting us living 
here.

Christina realizes that she is in a privileged position being so close to an all-black male 
institution of higher learning. While it may not have an impact on her own life, being the mother 
of a young black male, she has a strong desire to introduce her son to positive black males that 
can coach him through the unique experiences of growing up in the United States. As a middle-
class black woman living in an historically black neighborhood near downtown Atlanta where 
the AUC is situated, she is in a privileged position and looks to take advantage of that for the 
sake of her son.

Monique did not graduate from any institutions in the AUC, but the schools showed her 
the importance of education. It has been a source of inspiration for her because Atlanta, and the 
AUC, normalizes higher education:

Atlanta definitely opened my eyes to the importance of education and that is because of 
the Morehousers, the Spelmans, the Clarks and all these educated people. That’s what 
inspired me. Shoot I gotta go back and get this masters. I am gonna go back and get this 
PhD. I gotta do it because, Atlanta’s my home now. It’s what you do. We some 
educated folks here.

Atlanta as a hub for black education makes it the norm for people of color to achieve academic 
success. Because of the large number of black institutions and black college graduates in the 
city, higher education is so common that one can feel left out if they have not graduated from 
college or achieved some level of “formal” higher education. Therefore, the AUC and its alumni 
network are inspirational to residents of the larger Atlanta community. Alexucre grew up in 
Atlanta, then lived in Las Vegas for a while before moving back to Atlanta. Her experience 
speaks to the way education is normalized in Atlanta:
I think a lot of people in Atlanta are educated. So many colleges and universities where people at least spent a year there. But it’s completely different than Vegas. I’m like 26-year-old and people are congratulating me on being articulate. That’s not something I would get congratulated for in Atlanta. Atlanta is unique because it has all these educated successful black people.

Alexuce may not have realized how unique this level of black higher education was until she left the city. However, upon her return, she realized that the norm of educational success among black people is what makes Atlanta a special place to live.

8.3 A House Divided

While the AUC remains a beacon of light and hope for the larger black community in Atlanta, the consortium of colleges does not come without its own set of challenges. One of the biggest issues facing the Atlanta University Center is the in-group division that exists within the system. Each school in the AUC has its own history, tradition and culture attached to it. In addition, various funding streams allow for some schools to have more resources at their disposal than other institutions within the system. These divergent attributes can cause some alumni, employees and students to place the schools within the Atlanta University Center on a hierarchy. Some Atlantans see certain schools within the system as more elite and prestigious, while others are the more sub-par institutions. This discord within the AUC can lead to division, disunity, and jealousy between the students and alumni at the schools and can inhibit the progress of the entire system and negatively impact the way blacks and other races view black colleges. The following narratives explore this division that exist in the Atlanta University Center.

Rea was one of the most passionate and vocal supporters of the Atlanta University Center. However, she also recognized and spoke about the infighting that she perceived as a negative characteristic of these institutions:

The cons I see [about the AUC] where we have had infighting. Where its like yall aint better and the schools thinking their better or worse and its bullshit. And I get it. And I don’t think it’s just black schools. I think that if you have a consortium of white schools,
they would think one of their schools is better too. And I’m certain all of that is the same, but it’s unfortunate and I think it’s harder for us because we need to be unified. It’s not different and I really don’t think it’s different but you want us to be better cause we need to be more unified.

Rea points out that the division among black schools in a concentrated area is not unique to HBCUs, and probably exists in white spaces as well. In places like Boston where there are a large number of white colleges/universities in one area, one could imagine that there is division or competition between the schools. It is a natural rivalry and feeling to want one’s school to be better than other schools, regardless of the racial makeup and history of the institutions. However, black colleges are extremely vulnerable to low funding streams, school closures, and larger socioeconomic factors that play into the maintenance of the institution. Rea stresses the importance of unity across black schools in the AUC because they do not have the same luxury of being disunified as white folks. With their being so few HBCUs and understanding how important they are to black culture, she proposes that the AUC end the bickering hierarchical narratives and create a more unified front for each other and the black community at large.

The perception of hierarchies among black schools and students who attended these institutions has spilled over into the larger Atlanta communities. This affects school choice for high school students who plan on attending college in the AUC. Kelsey Nordstrom also spoke on the division in the Atlanta University Center. She argues that most Atlanta natives did not attend school in the AUC, but if they did, there was a hierarchy assigned to the institutions:

And those that do want to stay are typically buying into the Spelman/Morehouse dream. Some don’t even consider Clark Atlanta or Morris Brown at the time. Unfortunately, growing up here the running joke was anybody can get into Morris Brown. It’s just a second high school. And people didn’t see it as giving an opportunity to those who may not have performed really well. And there were people who went to Morris Brown, great business people, great doctors, nurses, everything else, but it had a reputation for partying and just being a bad school and like second high school. So those who were interested in that and may not have performed well or may not have done really well based on whatever in high school. They had the opportunity to go there, and I think that that was
Atlanta residents who did not attend any of the schools in the AUC also see this consortium of black colleges as an exclusionary club. Renee states:

It makes me feel more of an outcast. I feel like I am an outcast. Thinking of Atlanta with all the black scholars here. I feel like, it’s a hub for black education, but it is exclusionary. You a poor little black girl. A ward of the state. Foster kid. Someone coming from extreme poverty. You don’t know how to navigate your way. Even though there are a lot of black students, it is probably students from middle-class or upper-class families, or black kids in schools with programs for college outreach. The poorest of the poor, and the far, far, off kids. It’s not for them. It’s not for everybody.

While the AUC can be a symbol of greatness, black excellence and progression, students, alumni and faculty from the schools can make Atlanta residents who did not attend the University feel like outcasts or inferior to those affiliated with the Universities. These lines of division are clear across class lines. With many of the students coming from middle-class families, first generation and college students that came from poor backgrounds feel like they are not welcome by the AUC community.

8.4 AUC and the Larger Community

In addition to the division that exist within the Atlanta University, participants also critiqued the AUC for its lack of interaction with the local Atlanta community, particularly the working-class and poor areas of downtown where these institutions are situated. Outside of the participants that attended one of the schools in the Atlanta University Center, most of the other participants had very little substantial interaction with schools and institutions in the AUC. A few participants who came of age in Atlanta mentioned that their only interaction with representatives from the AUC were recruiters coming to their high school to encourage upper class men to apply to the institution. However, most of those participants lived in the city of Atlanta. Atlanta native participants who grew up in DeKalb County, or some other metro
Atlanta area reported even less interaction with students, organizations or teachers from the AUC. Other participants stated that they may have had teachers or co-workers who attended one of the institutions in the AUC, but that is the extent to their interaction with the institution.

Jermaine, an Atlanta native who grew up in the city of Atlanta had this to say about interactions with people from the AUC:

I came to Morehouse for my undergrad and a recruiter from Morehouse came to my high school and that’s the only reason I’m there. Well, no that’s not the only reason, but was the driving force of my attendance. But Morehouse guys was literally everywhere I went. They were the pastors at my church. The teachers at my school. They were a lot of the business owners that I mentioned previously. So were Clark and Spelman people. In-laws who married to the family were Spelman employees and the presence was real and influenced daily life.

Jermaine’s experience of seeing AUC representatives on a constant basis was unique in my sample. Participants that had any consistent substantial interaction with the AUC usually lived in the city of Atlanta, very close to where the AUC is situated.

Conversely, Kelsey an Atlanta native who grew up in Decatur and graduated from an AUC institution, stated that she did not interact with students, teachers or organizations from the Atlanta University Center while growing up in metro Atlanta. The culture, knowledge, history and black progression that makes the schools famous stay within the identity and social boundaries erected by the students, teachers, administrators and alumni. Local communities, and the metro area, may not benefit from the experiences created in Atlanta’s black colleges and universities.

Giselle did not attend one of the schools in the AUC, however, she is part of a sorority that exist in the AUC. She has a lot of pride in the AUC, largely because of her Greek affiliation. Yet, she also noticed that sometimes that pride and inspiration stays in one specific area:
A lot of pride and opened my eyes to a lot of things, especially the Greek community…and there’s always a plethora of things to do and just seeing that gives me a sense of pride. But I do kinda wish we would be able to migrate and stretch out a little bit. All this greatness is right here. I wish the greatness can become contagious and start spreading.

Giselle realizes that the concentration of greatness related to the Greek community and the AUC can be problematic. She has a desire for these positive influences to spread outside of the same communities and into other communities, so that more people can benefit from the positive advancements made in these schools and spaces.

Earlier, I mentioned that Christina was in a privileged position to have her son interact with and mentored by Morehouse men. However, my research findings show that this level of substantial interaction between the Atlanta University Center and the larger Atlanta community, particularly the low-income areas, is very rare. Christina is a middle-class woman who lives in an historic Atlanta neighborhood. Her connections with Howard University, other black colleges, black professionals and her professional occupation can help her secure a relationship with Morehouse and other schools in the AUC. However, this connection is a middle-class privilege. The black urban poor is the population that surrounds the Atlanta University Center (although whites and middle-class blacks are gentrifying these areas as I write this). According to my research, there is minimum interaction between the predominately middle-class students and teachers on the AUC campus and the largely working-class and poor population surrounding the schools. In addition, there is a practically non-existent relationship between the Atlanta University Center and the suburban poor and working-class areas of places like Decatur, Scottsdale, etc. This is significant because with the intense displacement that has and will continue to occur in Atlanta, most of the poor and working-class blacks will live in the metro areas of Atlanta. If black colleges do not begin a program that maintains relationships with the
poor and working-class blacks in the city, and the metro area, then it will be even more difficult
to do once Atlanta becomes majority white and the metro area becomes increasingly black.

When I brought up the lack of interaction between the AUC and the larger community,
Rea, a former student and employee stated:

And I’m glad you said that and you’re absolutely right, that is a con. That is a con that
the students don’t really engage with the nearby community. I will say that they don’t do
enough, but I also think that you have to be careful because there is an economic
difference. Not for everybody because there are plenty of students that come from the
neighborhood around here. But I think that you don’t wanna go like I’m giving handouts.
I think the assumption is because we’re giving handouts, we should want to engage with
the community cause we’re all black and that’s how we roll. But this is what we talk
about in terms of PWI’s. Does anybody ask white students do they go out in
impoverished white areas and help out? Do students from Emory go into Buford
Highway and do anything? I don’t know. I think the thought is that people should, and I
don’t disagree with that but I do think the AUC can be better connected with the
community. I think moreso that the students are growing up around here should know
that the AUC is a real option for them and that this Mecca right here is somewhere they
can go if its something they wanted to do in their life and you know it’s a possibility or
college is a possibility. That is a way I think the AUC should engage and also
environmental beautification and making sure the area is nice and livable. But I think
you have to be careful with AUC gentrification. Because you don’t wanna displace
people who have been living here for long periods of time. Because then you have this
higher economic status black person coming in and changing things. You have to
balance it. But I do think the AUC can be more engaging and students can be more
engaged with the community.

Rea confirms that the Atlanta University Center needs to improve their outreach efforts. She
admits that this is a challenge for the institutions. However, she indirectly justifies this lack of
interaction by arguing that white people do not encourage white institutions to interact with poor
white communities. One could imply that if society does not ask white institutions to increase
their recruitment efforts across class groups, then why do black institutions have to be the ones to
make that sacrifice. However, she later mentions that she understands the significance of black
institutions holding each other to a different standard and doing better by those who are not as
privileged. At the very least, exposure to the idea that attending these institutions are possible
for poor and working-class blacks and that it is a viable option for them to escape their current
condition and achieve socioeconomic mobility

Kennyshia, a recent graduate of a PWI in Atlanta talked about her interaction with
students from Atlanta University Center, when asked about how much contact she has with
people from there, she stated:

Now? Slim to none. When I was an undergraduate student, all the time. I meet a lot of
them and they pretty cool. They have a different mindset especially going to Morehouse.
Cocky mindset. I’ve never been to they campuses.

Kennyshia is currently a graduate student in the metro Atlanta area and she has little interaction
with anyone from the AUC. As a college student in the city of Atlanta, her experience was the
exact opposite. As stated previously, students and residents who have the luxury of living in the
city of Atlanta are more likely to create ties and relationships with the Atlanta University Center,
however the further a person moves out of the city, the less likely one is to create those
relationships.

8.5 Conclusion

Men and women come from all over the world to teach at and learn from the Atlanta
University Center. Many students come from places in the U.S. where they are the only black
people in their class or one of few in their schools. The idea of a black person achieving
academic and professional success is an anomaly, because some AUC students only saw white
people as professionals, leaders and influencers in their communities. However, the Atlanta
University Center normalizes higher education and black scholars can come here and feel part of
larger successful and forward-moving community. Even Atlanta residents who did not attend the
AUC often find appreciation for the university system. Its existence inspires them to achieve
academic success, receive cultural enrichment, and support the students that are making the
sacrifice to be here. While the AUC is a beacon of hope and light for many people in the Atlanta
area, the division between the schools can play out in the interaction between the students, faculty and alumni. Class identities are assigned to certain schools as people in the larger community view some institutions as more middle class, or professional than others. Like the perception of Atlanta as a whole, the working-class and poor communities that surround the AUC appear to be institutions that only exist to recycle the middle class. The lack of effort used to reach across class lines and provide opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, leads some participants to conclude that the set of institutions care little about the disadvantaged population in their racial group. Alumni and non-affiliates would like to see the AUC invest more efforts into letting the surrounding communities and students in the larger metro Atlanta area know that the system of universities can be a place for them. These endeavors are time sensitive, with the massive amount of gentrification taking place in the downtown area, more working-class and poor black people are being displaced to the outside areas of the city. Soon, middle-class white residents, businesses and corporations will surround this conglomerate of black excellence. Education is key to economic mobility (Grawe 2008). The Atlanta University Center has proven to be a world-class educational hub; therefore, it is the perfect site for building and maintaining a more economically equitable Atlanta.
9 BLACK MECCANISMS: BLACK ECONOMICS AND POLITICS

Another reason why many people consider Atlanta a Black Mecca is because of its black political legacy and the fact that the city holds a large number of black-owned businesses. In this chapter, I survey the way black Atlanta residents understand how local businesses and city politics affect and reinforce racial and class inequality. My analysis suggests that because Atlanta is home to many successful black-owned businesses and people in leadership, minority economic independence can be normal for some metro Atlanta residents. Atlanta natives did not recognize how unique it is to live in a city with so many successful black-owned businesses until they were older or relocated from another city. Subsequent sections show that across classes, all participants agree that it is important for blacks to patronize and support black-owned businesses. However, there is variance in why some choose not to support a few or most black-owned businesses. Most black-owned businesses are situated in the city. However, gentrification and better educational opportunities cause many middle-class blacks to leave the city. Larger structural issues like residential segregation, housing affordability and educational inequality geographically separate many black owned-businesses to be from their middle-class black market.

9.1 The Deeper Meaning Behind Black-Owned Businesses

Since the reconstruction era, black folks across the country have used entrepreneurship to help integrate into the larger U.S. society and create opportunities for themselves and others. Atlanta was one of the few cities that had a large black middle class available to help patronize and build their black business district. This tradition has lasted for over a century and is still a key reason why people consider Atlanta a Black Mecca. Because black-owned businesses have played such a key role in the city’s culture, many Atlanta natives don’t realize how special and
unique they really are; however, Atlanta transplants have a growing appreciation for the minority-run businesses in and around the city.

Mercy Ali, an 84-year-old working-class woman who has lived in Atlanta for over 50 years, recalls the years of the historic Auburn Avenue and Atlanta’s bustling black business district

When I got here [in the mid-1900s], there was two places, Santa Bella where all the post office workers hung out and the Lincoln Club where all the teachers hung out. And then they had the Top Hat. And we was truly happy. And the American legion on Auburn Avenue. Like you done died and went to heaven. You couldn’t tell. We had our own. And they accepted you. And it was like a whole new world seeing black folks really doing thangs and enjoying stuff.

When I asked her how seeing all these black-owned businesses made her feel, she claimed, “[Like] you done died and went to hem [heaven]. Shit you already there”.

Mercy Ali remembers the glory days of Atlanta’s black district, Auburn Avenue and Hunter Street. She describes these times as being in heaven, which shows how important it is to black people that they see firsthand, self-determination and ownership right before their eyes. Not only is it significant in the economic sense, but also the image of black ownership gives blacks a sense of power, independence and authority over their own lives and an acceptance they often do not see in the larger society. Older black Atlantans knew how special these black-owned spaces were, because they came of age during Jim Crow and saw firsthand how whites excluded blacks from participating and profiting from the United States’ capitalist system. However, younger black Atlantans did not understand the significance of Atlanta as a hub for black-owned businesses until they got older or left Atlanta and saw how few black-owned business districts existed in other cities.

When I asked Jermaine, a 39-year-old Atlanta native, how common it was to see black-owned businesses growing up in his life, he stated:
Very. It was the norm in my community in the 80s and 90s….It was so common place that I didn’t know how powerful it was until later. I could own a shop. I could be a doctor, or a construction worker, or be a plumber, or a lawyer. Mr. Johnson a lawyer. That was powerful. Looking back then, it’s like “wow that’s powerful”. That’s how it is. Now, I look back like that was something.

Although these businesses were inspiring to the black community, there was a class distinction even within the black community. Middle-class blacks were the group likely to see and receive inspiration from these successful businesses. The poor and working-class people received little benefit from this culture.

While there was a clear class separation between the black business working and middle-class districts and the poor black neighborhoods, the poorer residents had their version of a black-owned businesses as well. When I asked Tommy, a working-class man from metro Atlanta, how common it was to see black-owned businesses growing up, he stated:

You had the candy lady, mom and pop stores, think, think…ice cream truck, CDs….It was cool, but we still went to Wal-Mart, and Kroger….That's what they put in front of us. Our mom and pop stores didn't have money to advertise on TV….It was like, Wal-Mart has this sale…go here and buy this. Family Dollar. There are a lot of big businesses superior to small business. When a Wal-Mart comes, they will take business away from 5 or 6 stores. My motivation now is to build bigger businesses for our community.

Because Tommy grew up in a more disadvantaged neighborhood than Jermaine, and he lived in the metro Atlanta area, he did not see black-owned businesses in the traditional sense of grocery stores, cleaners, insurance companies, etc. However, the residents of his apartment building would sell ice cream, CDs and other goods to make money. Seeing a more unofficial, underground economic structure, and how bigger businesses would undermine these efforts has encouraged him to create bigger businesses for his community.

When asked how common it was to see black-owned businesses, Kelsey, a middle-class Atlanta native, suggested that it is not as common now as it was when she was growing up:
Growing up, a lot. Now, it’s not at all…. It was normal, so you think, okay well Mr. Lee or Mr. Johnson owns that store…you knew them by first name. It was like a family atmosphere, so that was commonplace to see black people as managers and owners growing up. My mother’s brothers who were here were all entrepreneurs, so it was nothing for me to see successful barbershops or successful – my uncle had a fleet of tour buses. He had a really lucrative company….So that was commonplace.

Kelsey, not only witnessed Atlanta’s black-owned businesses as a resident, but also had family members who participated in those businesses as well.

In Atlanta, individuals and larger institutions support and promote entrepreneurship. The Atlanta University Center, specifically Clark Atlanta University, supports and teaches students who look to branch out on their own. Kelsey claims that higher education institutions in Atlanta are also investing in black entrepreneurship:

There’s this thing that’s going on, and I have to say that I’ve noticed a pattern. If people are entrepreneurs here in Atlanta, and I don’t know what they’re doing and I really want to talk to them. And these entrepreneurs have graduated from Clark Atlanta. They are so successful and they have the best sense of value in business. I don’t see that with people who come out of other schools. That’s the trend that I’ve seen. Black people who I do business with who come out of Clark Atlanta are so on point and amazing. And I really want to talk to that business school. What is it that you guys are telling them or doing? I can name four people right now that I do business with on the regular. All of them came from Clark Atlanta anywhere between the 70s and two years ago. Amazing. And it’s like, what are they doing? I believe that their alumni network is extremely strong and very supportive, but it’s something that they’re teaching there that they’re getting.

It is also important to note that Kelsey states that she has seen evidence of this trend from recent to historical alumni. Many participants who praise the AUC speak of the past as its glory days, while stating that the current AUC may not hold fast to those past traditions. However, Kelsey sees evidence of entrepreneurship as something that has lasted throughout the generations.

Alexuce, a working-class woman raised in Atlanta, also recalls the normality of black-owned businesses:
“It was pretty common growing up. Mostly grew up in Decatur and Candler Rd area”.

Although she grew up outside of the urban core of the city, Alexuce still remembers how common it was to see black-owned businesses. Unfortunately, she did not notice these black-owned businesses until she lived in another city and returned to Atlanta. She claims, “It felt normal. I didn’t notice it until I left”.

Jameka grew up in North Carolina, and unlike many Atlanta natives, she immediately saw how unusual and exceptional it was for black-owned businesses to be so prevalent in the city:

Every time my parents come to visit I’m like, oh this is black-owned. They’re like, do we always have to go somewhere black-owned? And I say, yes. Yes, absolutely because I want to support my people. If anybody, I want to support my own, and it makes me want to do that because it’s so accessible here, so why not? Why not go to a black-owned lounge? Why not go to a Caribbean spa? Why not go to something black-owned if I can? If it’s accessible, and I have access to it, why not?

Jameka argues that it is imperative for minorities to support black-owned businesses in Atlanta, especially since the options are greater here than in many other cities. Growing up in a city where it may not be as common to see this large concentration of black-owned businesses, could be the reason why Jameka is so appreciative of this privilege.

Supporting black-owned businesses is not just important to Atlanta transplants because of the obvious economic benefits it brings to the black community, but it is also a form of resistance. Because Atlanta natives report less racist experiences with white people, black-owned businesses are normal and can be a financial benefit. However, blacks that move here from other places where anti-black racism is more obvious see black-owned businesses as a refuge from racism. Monique recalls this story about her grandmother:

When I was younger, it didn’t really hit me until I was probably in high school. But I grew up with my grandmother. I mean my mom was around some to, but mainly my grandmother. And I always remember my grandma getting up early to go to Ms.
Margo’s house. Sometimes, I would go with my grandmother when school was out, but she went to Ms. Margo’s house and the times that I would go with her to Ms. Margo’s house, I was very upset because my grandmother worked all day with Ms. Margo. She cooked, she cleaned, she looked after her children. She basically ran her house. And to me, I figured, if Ms. Margraet lived in this mansion and my grandmother who’s holding all of this together. Why we still living in this lil bitty house? My granny doing all this stuff for these people. These are governors. Why are we like this, when she’s the person that’s holding that family together? And they never looked at her as anything more than somebody that worked for them. That was when I had my first initial feelings about race and differences. And how one may value the other differently.

What’s fascinating about this story is the complex interconnection of race, class and exploitation of black bodies in the south. The skin on black bodies is not only racialized, but quantified and subjected to class exploitation. Monique explicitly noticed race and racism from an early age. Monique’s grandmother was the domestic worker who helped to keep Ms. Margo, a white woman’s, house in order. Although Monique’s grandmother added value to the lifestyle, her grandmother’s race did not allow her to have access to their excess and receive value for the value that she brought to the family. Instead, her race and class status limited her life chances, while she was helping to maintain and increase the class status of the whites who exploited her. This experience influenced Monique and she began to see the value (or lack thereof) that came with being black in the United States. However, Monique did not feel devalued because of this experience. Although systemic racism and southern traditions forced her grandmother to endure racist mistreatment, Monique did not feel she had to live the same way:

As an adult, I started dealing with a lot of issues during the election year. As for a more recent example, this whole with Trump and so forth. I left a high-paying job. A very very good teaching job, because they were being racist towards me. Like every day I came to work it was like why aren’t you out rallying. You’re not out doing that Black Lives Matter stuff. Every single day and I couldn’t take it anymore and that was what actually has me where I am now, feeling the need to work for myself, make my own money use my education to educate myself, my family my children my people. Because don’t nobody else care about us…I gotta try to make a difference now.
Unemployment is a racialized systemic barrier that limits mobility for African Americans. Adia Harvey (2005) finds that working-class black women often seek entrepreneurial efforts due to the absence of occupational opportunities. Monique, though currently a middle-class black woman, felt it was necessary to quit her job and start her own business because of the racism that she faced in the workplace. This example shows how racism and lack of opportunities, due to race, can lead both working-class and middle-class black women to start their own businesses. Instead of accepting racist behavior, she decided to see the value in what she offered to her field and start her own business, further suggesting that black-owned businesses are used as a form of resistance to the dominant racial structure as well as a place where black bodies have value.

Giselle, an Atlanta transplant from Florida, provided a great response to the commonality and importance of black-owned businesses:

I feel great seeing black people being owners. Cause anytime you have a salary, people are paying you a salary to forfeit your own dreams. And so to see black people owning their own business and being released from the chains of clocking in and clocking out, that is very liberating for me….I think it is our obligations as entrepreneurs to create [a] bigger brand…so that we can employ our brothers and sisters who are incarcerated and give them a second chance and the system that’s in place to set em up can’t hold us down….black entrepreneurs are helping to set a standard that is going to help our brothers and sisters that can’t find jobs in a regular system….I believe black entrepreneurs definitely have a social obligation to their community.

Like Monique, Giselle sees supporting black-owned businesses as an act of resistance against systemic issues like the effects of mass incarceration. Based on the work by Michele Alexander (2010) in *The New Jim Crow*, many formerly incarcerated black men are not able to find jobs due to their felony status. Giselle argues that because the black community have been victims of these racist actions, black owners can use their privilege to offer jobs to formerly incarcerated black men and women, which will allow them to reintegrate back into society and put them in a
position to make legitimate money so that poverty does not force them to engage in the same activities that put them in jail/prison in the first place.

9.2 Race, Place and Black-Owned Businesses

It is evident that businesses owned by black people are a staple in the black Atlanta community. However, there is a link between the placement of black-owned businesses and the perception many people of color have about them, and how well they can serve their consumer base. While Atlanta is known for being one of the unique cities that has been a hub for black-owned businesses and has maintained a sizeable black consumer base, finding one is not as easy as one would assume. When asked about how common it was to find black-owned businesses, Della, a middle-class woman, that lives in Decatur states, “It’s better than other places, but not at all as good as you would think it would be. And it’s not as easy to find the ones that I need as you would think it would be”. It appears that the majority of black-owned businesses are spread out across the metro Atlanta area, or they are concentrated in areas outside of the key market base. Monique used to live on the northern side of the city where a majority of the population is white or middle-class black. After moving to the city where the population is predominately black and working class, she saw a huge difference in the number of businesses owned by blacks and the industries that had products created for black people:

See, I spent about a good three years in Buckhead and Sandy Springs before I left and came to this side of town. There was no black anything in Buckhead and Sandy Springs. Nothing of value and substance….I can’t go anywhere in Buckhead and get some good ole fashioned Jamaican black soap. I had to come all the way over to the Westside to the West End to get the stuff I need to bathe my body wit. Or if I wanted some pure 100 percent Shea Butter. There is nowhere in Buckhead or Sandy Springs where I can get some pure Shea Butter. I gotta come all the way over to the west side, or where the black folks at to actually get the stuff that I need. You don’t see that over there. When I moved to this side of town, that’s when it was home. Like it’s a lot of legit stuff. Like unknown stuff. I’m talking there’s a whole vegan bakery that’s black-owned. Why am I going to these Asians to get my eyebrows done, when this sister right here, she can hook em up. And she already know how the arch of my brow should be, because the arch of my brow
is just like hers. She black just like me. She gets it. So, it was actually refreshing and enlightening to move over here. It gives me more motivation to do right.

Monique sheds light on the intersection of race and class and how that affects black entrepreneurship in Atlanta. It is intelligent for black owners to set up their businesses near their key demographic. Therefore, many of the black-owned businesses in Atlanta are situated on the westside and southern areas of the city. However, many middle-class blacks have migrated to the northern areas because of the perceived better school options and active housing market, which is largely affected by racist structures that invest more in predominately white residential areas and schools, than middle-class black areas. It is evident that systemic racism has decentralized the economic base of the black community. There is a large geographical separation between the black middle class who have the cultural need and desire for the resources black-owned businesses provide, and the location of many of these businesses. With many minority-owned businesses not being able to compete with the large store chains in the predominately white middle-class areas, they must set up shop in the working-class areas of the southside, thus further separating them from advantaged blacks that desire to shop in their stores.

I asked Kelsey how common it was to see black-owned businesses, and she recognized this geographical separation between black-owned businesses and the middle-class market:

Now, it’s not at all. Not a lot unless you’re on Facebook and somebody’s trying to sell you something. But the physical brick and mortar stores, you don’t see a lot of that. There’s a lot of people making money off black dollars, but unless you are in Camp Creek or Cascade, you don’t see it at all throughout the city.

Unless a business owner is lucky enough to set up their business in predominately black middle-class areas like Cascade and certain parts of Camp Creek, it may be very difficult to find a black-owned business outside of the urban city. Carver, a middle-class doctor, had a similar response:

I don’t know a lot of black-owned businesses that I can think of right off top. And I guess I don’t live in a black neighborhood to see where they exist, but I am sure they’re
there. I don’t know a lot of them. Like I could name you one or two. Like I know our [fraternity] chapter president owns his own consulting businesses. But just to name some off the top of my head no. Didn’t’ really have an impact on me.

Carver lives in the metropolitan area of Atlanta and because he is part of a predominately black organization, he can name one black entrepreneur. Outside of that network, Atlanta black-owned businesses are somewhat foreign to him.

Rachel was born and raised in the city of Atlanta and the metro area; yet, she claims that it was rare to find black-owned businesses:

As I got older, you start to see more and more of them. Even with that, I would notice as a kid that, okay it wasn’t that many, and then they didn’t seem to stay in business long either. For a few reasons. I have a few theories on that. It wasn’t a lot. I didn’t see a lot growing up. Now, as I got older more of them started to appear, but I feel like even now there aren’t any – like you still have to go look. It’s not like other races where, you know, the Vietnamese people go and support the Vietnamese people, or the Chinese go and support the Chinese stores and all of that, so they know where to go. It’s not really like that with black people. It’s like you have to go on Google and have to go look up, okay well where is a black-owned beauty supply?

Kennyshia, a 23-year-old black graduate student gave a similar testament about black-owned businesses in metro Atlanta:

It depends on what part you go to the city. But for me, living in majority white areas, it’s not that common like Midtown or Buckhead. It’s not really common in the areas where I lived. It may not be common because of the areas that I lived in.

Alma, a middle-class transplant, also saw how difficult it was to frequent black-owned businesses outside of the city. She stated, “In my area, its not the majority. But they are out there and when I find them I shop there. They’re there”.

There is a relationship between race, class, geographic layouts, and black businesses. Often, the intersection between race, class and place forces middle-class blacks to choose between living in a middle-class white area with highly-funded schools, better transportation, a thriving economic district, racism and few black-owned businesses, or the working-class black
area with cultural institutions, more black-owned businesses and poorly funded schools. While black-owned businesses may be integral in Atlanta’s reputation as a Black Mecca, they are not as normal and easily accessible as they may appear. These divisions are inextricably linked to place, space and class.

9.3 Perceptions of Black-Owned Businesses

When asked if it was important for black people to support black-owned businesses, all the participants reported that it is important. Most of them stated that they patronize or try to patronize businesses owned by black people. However, several respondents assumed that black people as a whole do not support black-owned businesses enough and assume that blacks do not see the importance in doing so. While the data does not support the assumption, a few participants reported having friends that do not support black-owned businesses. Some participants recognized the larger disadvantage that black-owned businesses face, while others argue that a cultural deficiency in the black community explains why people refuse to patronize black-owned businesses.

Monique was one of the participants that believed it is important for blacks to patronize their own businesses. However, she also reported having a bad experience with one:

Here is where it kinda gets interesting. I have been employed by a black-owned business and I think I had more trouble out of them than my previous employer [who was white]. Money wasn’t on time, always issues, she talked down to me worse than my other employer [than the one that was racist] mmhm [yeah]. And she was the same color me. Had way more issues. There’s a difference.

Although Monique did not have a good experience with her black employer, she still values them and understands that it is a key to cultural survival. When asked how important it is for blacks to support their own businesses, she stated:
We have to do it. No matter what we have to do it. And now that I am in the process of opening the doors of my own business and quote this exact. It doesn’t matter, you can say I said it. Black people have to get over themselves and fall into themselves. We have to get together. We have to stick together. We gotta get that community back. We gotta get that village back, because that’s the key to survival. That’s the absolute key to survival to support our own, my own. It’s essential to survival.

Although Monique’s negative experience did not stop her from supporting or advocating for the support of black-owned businesses, there are others who have refused to patronize black-owned businesses based on their experiences.

Alma has a friend who refuses to support black-owned businesses:

I do have a friend that years ago when T.I, and Tiny, Tiny was opening a nail bar and one of my friends from Mississippi, I said “when you come up, lets go to Tiny’s nail bar” and she said “I’m not going there”. I said, “why not”? She said, “she already has money, so I’m not going there”. I said, “you think the Asian people don’t already have money? The only thing is they don’t have a TV Show. You don’t think they have a nice car? Its just not televised, so you’d rather go and support them because you don’t know what they have…than your own people because you think they already have money”. But that’s the way she sees it.

What is fascinating about Alma’s friend is that in her business decisions, she believes that class trumps race. Alma’s friend would prefer to patronize a non-black business that appears to need her support, than a black-owned business that appears to be doing well.

Rachel’s response displays a new way of understanding this line of thinking:

I always get the advantage of being black and being Ethiopian, so in the Ethiopian community we have Ethiopian stores. We go to buy Ethiopian food and things that we need to make Ethiopian food that you can’t buy in the grocery store… Then it’s like, but on the flip side I would never really see that in the black community, so it was kind of like why don’t they do this and keep the money within and help each other instead of, I’m going to put a liquor store across the street from your liquor store so we can compete. As opposed to let’s try to come together and find another location and make money. As a kid when, I was in the Ethiopian aspect of the Ethiopian world. It was cool because it was like, okay this is cool. We can all help each other and be supportive, and whatever you need there’s somebody there that handles that, and I guess you feel less likely to be, I don’t want to say got over, but I went to this Ethiopian guy to do my taxes. I know he’s not going to charge me $200 to do my taxes. He’ll charge me $50. You know, you won’t feel as much as just people are trying to get over on me. I feel like when I went to the black places it wasn’t that many of them, and then it’s like, okay this week it’s this person, and you closed down, so now it’s a new store. Now I’ve
got to build a new relationship with this new owner and then that owner’s gone. It’s kind of like, “all right, you know what? Let me just go somewhere else where they’re consistent, and I can actually build up some kind of” – not really necessarily have to have a friendship with people, but I’d rather support someone I know or someone that’s like me or someone that I can agree with on things, as opposed to just giving my money to whoever. Yeah, you know, it was hope on one side because I had the Ethiopian side, but then on the other side it was kind of like what’s the point because it ain’t going to last? Why open a business if it’s going to close in a month?

Rachel’s perspective is unique and multi-faceted. She recognizes early on that she has the advantage of blending in with the black and Ethiopian community. First, there is an othering taking place where she does identify as black because she agreed to being part of the interview, yet she others black Americans when she recognizes a “flaw” or cultural deficiency in black American practices. Because she sees Ethiopians with their own stores, supporting each other’s businesses, and she does not see it as much in the black community, she assumes that the same business practices carried out in the Ethiopian community do not exist among black Americans. Other participants who reported living closer to the city of Atlanta where one can find more black-owned businesses debunk this myth. In those spaces, respondents reported seeing collective economics as a common practice among black people. Also, Rachel does not take into account the fact that black-owned businesses are often separated from their economic base due to gentrification and are forced to pay higher interest rates on business loans. Rachel concludes that the non-black business will be open longer and offer her the type of service that she is looking for. Later, Rachel does state that she believes it is important to support black-owned businesses and she continues to support them regardless of some level of inconvenience.

When it came to black-owned businesses, Mercy Ali stated:

Yeah, but you know they don’t treat you right either. They wanna give you second class service. I think it’ll be good if we can figure out how to give us quality service. Do for us what you do for other folk. But they wanna short change us.
Although Mercy Ali does not conclude that she will not support black-owned businesses, she generalizes black-owned businesses by concluding that they don’t treat you right and provides second-class service. She did not specify by saying some, which can suggest that she implies that all black-owned businesses might perpetuate these practices.

While some participants came to conclusions based on their personal interactions with black-owned businesses; others chose to explore the idea through a more structural framework. Giselle critiques black-owned businesses as well, but also explores some of the larger reasons why they may not be able to compete with non-black businesses:

The one thing that makes me proud is black people have only ben been educated since the 1950s and black women are the number one educated among all women of all ethnicities and all colors and more likely to start a business. It’s just that we don’t have the employability or the capital behind our businesses to maximize. So I am very proud of where we are but we still have a long way.

While blacks have been receiving education since shortly after the Civil War, it is important to note that educational opportunities did increase for some blacks during the 1950s and 60s as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. Giselle recognizes that the lack of capital and human resources due to socioeconomic factors play a key role in the functioning of many black-owned businesses.

Rea also considers larger racial issues when critiquing black-owned businesses:

Most of the ones I support will probably be restaurants and hair salons. Some have been great and some have been trash, but I think that’s with white people too. I think black people can do better with customer service overall sometimes. But I think there’s a lot of people doing a great job of it and we have to support them. And we also have to vocalize if we feel like you can do better and we wanna support you, but you need to do better. Customer service is the only thing I can think of that sticks out and it’s not everywhere.

Rea realizes that there are pros and cons to every business and people regardless of race. In addition, she does not allow her bad experience with a few businesses to taint her perspective on
an entire race of people. She recognizes that some businesses are good and some are not, just like there are in the white population.

The most fascinating finding I came across in terms of the support of black-owned businesses, came from Jameka. She is an avid supporter of black-owned businesses, yet she explained that there can be a much deeper reason as to why many are not able to grow and compete on the larger level:

Granted, the interesting thing about the black businesses is that they kind of stay mom and pop. They don’t really get too big. And somebody told me, a black business owner, she actually owned her own hair salon. And she was like, “in Atlanta you can’t get too big”. And I remember her saying this, she was like, “you can’t get too big in Atlanta because black people will start to resent you for getting too – for having too much. If you’re going to have something have it be small. Have the people wait. Have the people waiting in line because you’re more popular if you stay small”….That’s really crazy, right? Crazy. But as she said that I was like, well why do you think black people want you to stay small? She was like, “well because if you get too big then you’ll get too big for them. They want you to stay small, so that you will keep catering to them. You will always keep thinking about them. If we start getting bigger, then you start have to worrying about these white liberal folks coming in and wanting to spend their money. And then the more white people you have coming, the less black people you have”. It was really interesting how she really methodically thought about this.

So instead of the lack of growth in black-owned businesses being the result of a default in business practices or some cultural deficiency among black people, some black-owned businesses stay small as a strategy used to keep their economic base. In Elijah Anderson’s (2000) study Code of the Street, he finds that street, or more disadvantaged people, see upward mobility as “disrespecting” the community. Therefore, some decent, or more working-class or middle-class people have to advance on their own. Street people may police the decent individuals to ensure that they don’t leave the community for higher socioeconomic status. This action of “moving out the hood” is seen as selling out, or “acting white” and can even result in physical violence between the groups.
Black people know that one of the worst things a person and/or black business can do is sell out. This act of selling out can come in the form of moving one’s business to the “white” side of town, or removing products that appeal to blacks and replacing them with products that appeal to whites. Shea Moisture, a black-owned personal care company, received backlash for abandoning its key demographic, black women with natural hair. The company recently released a promotional ad that included women of all colors. The central message of the video was “break free from hair hate,” as both black and white women expressed the difficulties of hair care. Many Shea Moisture supporters, specifically women of color, felt the ad erased their presence and some called for a boycott of the company. While it appears that the negative feelings were short lived, Shea moisture learned a valuable lesson. Appealing to their key demographic, while attempting to expand their reach can be a complicated process.

For many black-owned businesses, servicing their community is equally as important as becoming wealthy. Therefore, they remain or appear to remain small as a way of communicating to their core market that they have not forgotten about them or the needs of their people. Unfortunately, many people and businesses both black and white, have used black people as a means to jump start their goals. Then when they have enough capital, they began to appeal to non-black markets in order to become wealthy. Therefore, black business owners in Atlanta employ an alternative strategy of remaining small. I am careful not to conclude that black people do not want to see black business owners flourish and grow. On the contrary, they want to see them do well, while at the same time know that the increase in profit will not result in them being the victims of racial and class exploitation. So, to keep that relationship in good standing, black business owners stay small or appear small for the good of their business and community.
9.4 Politics as Usual

Another key Black Meccanism that helps the city of Atlanta maintain its Black Mecca status is the fact that it is the city with the longest black mayoral tradition of any major city in the United States. In addition to the mayoral leadership, black people also run the City Council. Unlike other cities with a sizeable black population, some participants claim black people control Atlanta’s policies. In this final analysis section, I explore black Atlanta residents’ perception of politics and its effect on both the working and middle-class blacks in the city and metro area. While Atlanta’s black political leadership has resulted in job increase, opportunities for black entrepreneurs and the coveted Olympic Games, some respondents claim that many of these legislators are still subject to rich white Atlantans and the corporate dollars they control. Some people argue that blacks control the politics and whites control the money in Atlanta, which may explain why some black political leaders have put their initiatives towards city growth and expansion, as opposed to social reform and equal opportunity for people across economic classes. Simply put, participants argue that black political leaders have ignored the needs of the poor, working-class and even some middle-class black folks in the southern parts of Atlanta. Although participants heavily criticized the more recent political leaders of the city, most of the respondents saw black political leadership and control as an advantage and an inspiration to their race.

9.4.1 Mayors for the People

Like many Black Meccanism of the city, Atlanta’s politics have undergone many changes. Jermaine, a middle-class Atlanta native, recalls what times were like under previous mayors:
So if you look at the tenure of Maynard Jackson or Andrew Young time, it felt like back then we were all on an even playing field and every time our leaders elevated, one of us, the rest of us benefitted in a way.

In the past, Jermaine argues Atlanta’s black city leaders were able to enact policies that, not only improved the lives of privileged people, but also provided opportunities for disadvantaged people. Kelsey, an Atlanta native, also remembers hearing stories about Maynard Jackson:

Maynard Jackson was very encouraging. I was so excited at the time as a child and then listening to my dad talk about him and all the great stuff he was going to do for Atlanta.

Della also speaks about Maynard Jackson in the following statement:

Like I think Maynard Jackson and what he did with contracts and stuff like that, that was helpful for low-income and assuming they went to black businesses that hired people.

Early political leaders, particularly Maynard Jackson, were able to secure funds for black people, which in turn allowed them to provide employment opportunities for the working class.

Rea also spoke highly of Atlanta’s early political leaders:

You definitely saw an emergence of black wealth and empowerment because of the election of Maynard Jackson. So, I think that as one example alone. We see other people have come and continued that legacy, and had we not had other black people, I don’t know if that would’ve continued.

Rea argues that Maynard’s legacy for balancing city growth and expansion with economic reform across classes continued with his successors. Atlanta has continued to be a Black Mecca because early political influencers like Maynard Jackson laid the groundwork for equality and equity, while successors continued to build on that legacy.

There are some people who are convinced that even more recent politicians continue to maintain that legacy of black empowerment and opportunity. Christina, a middle-class woman from Michigan, states:

And Kasim Reed is black black….Kasim Reed is like, I’m black black black, we black, I’m black, this is black, black black, and it’s okay, right? I see it. I recognize it, and I love it. I love it.
While some participants praise the success of former Atlanta leaders, others see the cultural empowerment in present-day mayors. Ressy, a middle-class Atlanta resident who was born in New York, sees the black political advancement in Atlanta as more progressive than what people would find in the seemingly more progressive northern cities. She states, “we do have a black mayor, and these things where in a lot of places even up north, I mean, that would be a first”.

9.4.2 Political Perception Equals Personal Power

In addition to the advancements past legislatures have made through policy, the image of seeing a black person in power encourages many people to see Atlanta as a unique and special place to reside. When I asked Alma how she felt seeing black people in leadership, and specifically the black politicians, she stated, “I think its empowerment and like we’re rising and not like how we’ve once been seen… I like the fact that we have a black mayor”. Ressy argues that the image alone of black people in power gives people of color a sense of hope. She states, “I guess it just doesn’t make a difference because people at least have a little bit of hope when there’s someone in leadership that looks like them”. Lenny, a middle-class transplant from Florida, states:

I think it’s a great thing we had so many black leaders for such a long time and for a person to want to do that and have all that pressure, I think it’s awesome. I like the fact that has happened. It impacts me. Although people don’t want to admit it but if you black you lean towards black or white you lean towards white. Like our president now who as much as he say he don’t in his speeches he lean towards right wing. Everything he does is for them.

For Lenny, Atlanta’s politics signifies a kind of reverse power structure. It is the answer to the white power structure that exists on the national level. He believes people in power will be more likely to support their own people, regardless of race. Since Donald Trump supports people within his political party and racial group on the federal level, he likes that black city leaders
support their own people on the municipal level. Alexuce made a similar comment when she stated:

It’s good to have that. You feel like you have someone who knows the needs of yourself and your community and it’s easier to vocalize it to someone who looks like you and comes from where you come from….maybe it’s easier when you see someone that looks like you.

The image of seeing a black person in power is still very important and provides a sense of hope to the black population in Atlanta. Shine, a working-class woman, shared a similar sentiment:

I think it [politics] affects me. But who wouldn’t want a black person in control…like who’s to say. Trump for instance in control and he don’t care about nobody but rich white people. So like all the police brutality and Kasim Reed, he’s a black man and he’s not having that go down here. Because he’s a black man in a high position and he can prevent bad stuff from happening to other black people.

9.4.3 Black Politics/White Control

While Atlanta holds well-deserved bragging rights as a city that has black political control, sources show that rich whites can play a role in the policy outcomes of city government (Monroe 2010). Buckhead CEOs and major business owners in the northern parts of the city may not hold many political offices, but their financial power can sway the decisions of black politicians. In some participants’ minds, the perception that whites “really control” the city can invalidate the position that blacks play in Atlanta politics.

Giselle, a middle-class Atlanta transplant, states:

Let me just say that I don’t think black people control a lot of the politics here and let me explain to you why. If you think back about the situation with the principals who were arrested for changing scores quote unquote. If the politics is really in the hands of the black people, that would’ve never went down….I mean I think that Atlanta is the Black Mecca, but let’s not be foolish here. White folks still run it. The political things. Because if that were true, Trump would definitely not have won Georgia and John Ossof would have won that election. So let’s not get too ahead of ourselves. We’re on the right track, but we’re not there yet.
Giselle claims that if blacks controlled the politics in Atlanta, then the right people would be in office. Rea also speaks about the control that whites have over Atlanta politics:

I also think that plenty black people in political leadership that have abused their power and have rested on the fact that their black and look like somebody else, but probably got white folks in they pockets too….There’s no doubt that some of them share the same skin color and that’s it.

Carver recognizes the role whites play in Atlanta’s black government and goes so far as to say that black politicians are puppets for the millionaires and billionaires in Atlanta:

They [blacks] do own the politics, but I think they’re still the puppet master behind the Arthur Blanks…while politically on face African Americans may be running it, but the Arthur Blanks the millionaires and billionaires are pulling the purse strings. Cause they gotta have this place where people will come down there. And a lot of those blight areas down there, they gotta be moved. And the people those facilities have to be moved.

9.4.4 Seatsitters

In addition to whites “really” controlling the politics of the city, some participants argue that the benefits that come from black people controlling political power does not trickle down to the working-class and poor populations of the city. As stated earlier, Atlanta appears to be a place where the advantaged class and race can benefit from its Black Meccanism. However, poor and working-class residents will find it hard to get support from the same institutions that help define Atlanta’s “Black Mecca” status. The political structure of the city is no different. Jermaine states:

So if you’re doing well in Atlanta as an African American, the political structure, all these black figure heads are gonna help you do even better. If you’re starting out disadvantaged, it’s not gonna help you at all.

Kelsey, a middle-class native, claims:

But I think that they [politicians] became so focused on the economic development, they forgot the people. And so you traded one for the other….You forgot the homeless. You forgot the people who got you elected. You sat and shook hands with your right and crossed your fingers with your left behind your back. So, you shook the hand on deals and then crossed your fingers for hope for your people to be okay for what it was you were doing, and that’s what I think.
This trading of economic development and city expansion for the lives of disadvantaged populations in the city, has caused many people to distrust black politics and the way it works. Alexuce, a working-class Atlanta native, had a rather positive outlook on black city leaders. However, when asked about politicians and what they focus on, she also stated:

We all look at politicians as liars that don’t help us…trying to live up to the prestige of Atlanta. Doing things like buying a 3 million dollar street car that has no use. Tryna put a stadium in for a team that really just started winning.

Even those metro Atlanta residents who admire black political control, still maintain a certain level of distrust for the governmental structure, largely because of their focus on making Atlanta look appealing, while ignoring the needs of its residents.

Mercy Ali has lived in Atlanta for almost fifty years and witnessed how some black politicians have seemed to disregard the needs of the black residents and black businesses and have turned the city over to the highest bidder:

Fifty something years we done had a black mayor and all our city gone. They done tore down all the projects. Took away all our neighborhoods. What do you call that? We owned vine city. We owned this stuff and now we don’t own nothing.

Carver also sees that everyone is not able to benefit from the political goal of city expansion:

I mean economically, but I don’t know if all groups, races are being benefitted as some other ones are. Its bringing the money in, but there’s people that cant afford that because of the taxes and stuff because it has to be paid for in some way.

While black Atlanta residents see the political structure as a glimmer of hope because of the image of a black person in power, and recognize the historically positive advantages that having a black person in office has had on people of color, they also see the current state of affairs in Atlanta (displacement of poor people, city expansion, class division, etc). They argue that many black political leaders have been the perpetrators of these actions, or have done little
to mitigate the negative effects of gentrification Jameka’s response to the question on black political leadership speaks to the relationship between black voters and political leaders:

Atlanta is a very interesting place because you’ll have a black face, but that black face doesn’t help all black people. That’s part of the problem…While we might have black, as they call – what did Malcolm X call them? Seat sitters. Yeah, these black people sitting in a certain seat. Just because they’re black doesn’t mean that they have policies that are going to help black people…coming from North Carolina, and not seeing many black politicians. I’ve never seen a black mayor or a black governor or a black counsel person….But I think that black people we like to do this a lot. We vote for people because they’re black…So I think we need to be very careful thinking that our political participation only is at voting.

This notion of seat sitters is the way that Jameka describes some of the people that hold office in Atlanta politics. While some people may seek the position to help create change for the more vulnerable populations, other leaders may occupy the seat for prestige, or to advance their own interests. However, the power of political representation is impactful because leadership that reflects the people is inspiring to the next generation. In addition to that, a person may feel more comfortable and empowered to use their voice to affect change if the people in power look like them. Jameka critiques constituents by encouraging them to not only exercise their right to vote, but also hold politicians accountable for the decisions that they make, so that we will have more the positive Atlanta politicians and less seat sitters. Active political participation is necessary for leaders and residents.

9.5 Conclusion

While there is a glaring distrust that many people have on the politics of the city of Atlanta, it seems that there is still an undying hope that exists in the democratic process. Most participants still say that they vote, even though several them believe that on some levels, it will not yield positive effects to them or their people. Both black-owned businesses and black politics are key factors that help describe Atlanta’s status as a Black Mecca. While people
should recognize Atlanta for these characteristics, there are class divisions that make the experiences within black-owned businesses and black politics very different. Perceptions of black-owned businesses and the displacement of the black middle class can cause negative effects on the market that these businesses need to stay afloat. The black politics of the city, with Maynard Jackson, may have initiated a strategy that allowed for a trickle-down economic strategy where the working class benefitted from the opportunities given to the middle class. However, many blacks argue that politicians seem to be only concerned with city expansion and passing policies that help to improve life outcomes for whites and the black upper middle class. Addressing these class issues within the Black Meccanisms of the city is the first step to helping Atlanta live up to its title as a Black Mecca.
10 CONCLUSION

10.1 Education is the passport to the future… -Malcolm X-

Race and class inequality is evident in the larger U.S. society and exist in cities that can be seen as Black Meccas—places that are havens for black people and often recognized as spaces where they can achieve economic mobility. While I have spent the last three chapters discussing the success of Atlanta as well as the challenges of many of its residents, I would like to conclude this study by discussing solutions to some of these social problems. Although participants offered several ideas on the ways Atlanta and other cities can make their areas more egalitarian for all people, the most popular and common solution that respondents across social identities presented was a more improved educational system. Most respondents claimed that access to a better formal education and more life skills training for vulnerable populations would help increase opportunities and lead to better decision-making by residents. In addition, it would give those individuals who were born in poverty the opportunity to work their way out of it, so that the next generation would have a chance at a better life.

There is an inextricable link between housing and education. Since the passing of HOPE VI policies intended to address concentrated poverty in urban neighborhoods, mixed-income communities began to replace the public housing complexes set in the city of Atlanta. While this was an attempt at helping to alleviate concentrated poverty, the level of economic inequality in the city is still at a level higher than most major cities in the United States. Scholars argue that this level of segregation exacerbates “group stratification by creating some resource-rich educational environments for white students and resource-poor educational environments for black students”. (Pooley 2015) The public education system reflected this inequality, as working-class and poor black areas became the site for underperforming schools. One of the
most important ways to improve financial opportunities for current/former public housing residents is to provide equal access to quality education, as research shows it is associated with upward mobility (Grawe 2008). Greenstone, Looney, Pashtik and Yu (2013) states, “higher education has always been a key way for poor Americans to find opportunities to transform their economic circumstances”.

Across race, class and gender identities, participants concluded that the key to solving the racial and class divide in Atlanta is to improve the quality of education in the city. Although respondents considered and discussed other issues such as housing, poverty, and gentrification, the most common and consistent solution was to address the kind of education everyone has access to. Tommy is a 30-year-old working-class Atlanta native, and he attributes poor education to the systemic racism that he saw around him:

My experience with racism. The reason I say it’s the system is, think about it, when you're in school, I have nothing against school or college, like that, just when you think about it….the education they are providing isn't an education to show you how to be a big business owner, but to show you how to work for a big business owner….So who's making all that money. This is the mindset that is being taught to a select amount of people. We haven't passed down the knowledge or information of how to build big business, or how to invest like we should so we can help our community have the resources it should to move out of this poverty state or this poverty mindset….we've been told to get an education, get a good job, get big student loans, have a lot of student debt, get a job that is not paying enough….They don't teach us that, so they keep us in bondage.

Tommy has an issue with the type of education marginalized people receive. While society encourages black students to go to school, incur debt and work for others, society teaches middle-class whites to create jobs for themselves and people that look like them. He argues that this disparity in types of education reinforces the generational poverty that exists in black communities. If the same tax laws, economic strategies and business practices taught in white
schools and communities are taught to black children, then the level of economic and racial
disadvantage in the city of Atlanta would begin to decrease.

Monique, middle-class Atlanta transplant, had a similar feeling about education. When
I asked her what she felt was some of the biggest issues Atlanta needed to work on, she stated:

Homelessness and um education. But not education on a scholastic level per se where its
higher…but education as far as resources on how to manage money, and how to get over
substance abuse and how to get past a broken marriage. Education on life. Because
that’s what really, I’ve never really seen life until I moved here…cause it’s a lot of
people here with some real life issues. It’s like some legit issues people are having and
they acting out because they don’t have an out. So we need to try to educate and help.

It is evident that Atlanta produces some of the most formally educated and successful black
people in the world. However, this has not solved the racial and economic divide in the city.
Graduating from college is one way to increase socioeconomic mobility. However, everyone
does not have access to this formal education, particularly on a college level, largely due to
economic disadvantage. Poor and working-class people may have family members depending
on their success and not have the time to wait four, six, or eight years to see a financial return on
their academic investment. Therefore, education on life skills, building a business, and coping
with personal and systemic barriers is also a necessary form of education when addressing the
conditions under which many black people live.

Many black people in Atlanta value higher education. Terra claims that poverty and
unemployment exist in the city because some people cannot or will not go to college. Like many
people across race and class in this country, she argues that it is the way to socio economic
mobility:

They need formal education. They get life lessons that aren’t right or they learning at the
wrong time. Being properly educated. Formal education and what it can do. It gives you
choices. Like playing the game of life. When you play it and go to college, you get to
spin the wheel more times for your profession than if you choose not to go. More
options. Granted you start in debt, but your earning power is higher. Its education and proper guidance.

While many of my participants, particularly middle-class respondents, gained access to higher education. They often criticized Atlanta’s educational system and communities for not encouraging students to attend trade schools, or acquire job skills. They saw trade schools just as important to success as a four-year traditional college/university. I asked Mick, a middle-class Atlanta native and graduate of the Atlanta University Center, why there was so much poverty in the Black Mecca:

Honestly Jon, I don’t think I can pinpoint it for you. In conversations with friends and colleagues, and being an educator, because we have to talk about socio-economic status a lot. If I just had to speak on I would say that the disparity boils down to education…I used to work at one of the worst high schools in South Fulton County. Little nickel and dime kids. Drugs in the neighborhood. I had them come to me and say they wanted to try to do something better. I can’t tell them to go to school and become a doctor. I was like have you thought about going to one of the Pharm schools and becoming a Pharm Tech? He was like what you mean? I told him, you’re out here nickel and diming and there is no telling what you are selling. Why keep having to worry about running from the law, when you can go to school, get you a job as a pharmacy tech and do it legally to help people treat ailments? He was like I had never thought about it like that. That type of job will put you in position to become an actual pharmacist. At that point, you are talking about making exponentially what you are doing nickel and diming for someone else. A friend of mine who is a pharmacist, I hopped on the phone and sent him a text asking how to get in the business. What you suggest is the starting salary for a pharmacist at that point, straight out of school? He said he wouldn’t get out of the bed for less than $150,000. I showed the young man the text, he looked at me, and looked at the text, and he said let me get myself together. I can make that and not have to look over my shoulder? He was like, I'm done with this because I’m tired of looking over my shoulder. Whether he followed through or not, I don’t know, just the fact that the seed was planted….We have to stop college kids out of success. Standardized four-year college degrees aren’t for everyone and that may not be what it takes in life.

Mick’s response suggests that success and equality is not about making it to college, but about giving people the options to do what they enjoy, while obtaining the resources to secure a safe and high quality of life for their family. It is not enough to be in a city filled with colleges and
universities, but access to these schools, or other career options are just as essential when addressing the link between poverty, economic inequality and education.

Renee and Alexuex both see Atlanta as a place that only benefits those that are already privileged. However, Renee sees education as the reason for this divide:

Education is one of the reasons. Poverty is not going anywhere and these kids will be less off than their parents. Atlanta is not for everybody. It is for some people. Atlanta is for the already educated. It doesn’t raise up people to be better. It is a shark race. The survival of the fittest. It is so competitive. You have to already be something.

Kelsey also claims that poor education is one of the key contributors to poverty. Although she and Mick have benefitted from a formal education, they also understand the value of diversity in terms of options for educational success:

Somewhere along the way, we told kids four years or nothing. We forgot about junior colleges. We forgot about trade schools. We don’t offer them other options than that. Everybody’s not built for four-year colleges. When they started constructing the dome, they had to go and get a great majority of the percentage of construction people from out of state because our people in state don’t have trade skills. That’s ridiculous.

Atlanta has become the Black Mecca largely because of its investment and focus on higher education. However, its neglect of the education in trade and job skills have resulted in racialized class division, unequal job access and poverty. Jermaine also claims that Atlanta schools should be more specific in training students for, not just college, but useful jobs for modern-day society:

What education means now has no value. If we’re not training our people for the jobs today then what is the education for. I’m all for liberal arts education, even going back to primary school. But there has to be some training for the jobs that need to be occupied. People say there’s no jobs. There’s tons of jobs. We just can’t do em. So if the education system does not align itself with the industry that Atlanta is being known for, particularly tech because [it] is taking off here and we have zero part of it. So, if the schools are not addressing things like that, we’re going to lose big.
When Alexuce graduated from high school, her dad came down from New York to visit his daughter and congratulate her for achieving this milestone. However, they both noticed something different about her high school in Atlanta versus the schools in New York:

So, even my graduation class like of 300 people and we were all black and I didn’t think too much of it til my dad who visits from New York came and was like “its so many of yall”. [Laughs]. “I’ve never seen a graduation class this big with just black people”….My dad lives in Long Island in New York…the high school up there you test into them so you can go to any high school really. So, he was shocked to see so many blacks at one school. So, the schools down here are still segregated a little bit.

While poor education is not a social issue that is unique to Atlanta or even the South, other areas of the country have provided children with the opportunity to test into better schools outside of their neighborhood and get access to better education. Unfortunately, Atlanta does not make it easy to do the same. There are some cases where a black student in Atlanta can test into a better school that is outside of their neighborhood. Unlike New York, the transit system is not as effective for people who must travel further distances in a short amount of time. It can take hours for a student to take public transportation to the other side of the city to go to school, and then come back home for dinner after school. She/he has spent a large part of the day just getting to and from school. Residential segregation, transportation racism, and educational inequality, force parents to send their kids to the neighborhood schools, even though the funding and quality of education is poor. Carver, recognized this combination firsthand after moving to Atlanta:

Still a lot of racial political things going on [in Atlanta], particularly the MARTA thing. They’re talking about expanding it, but still there are certain communities in Alpharetta and outside the perimeter north. That criminal element they assume will be inundated if they allow public transportation to come in to those particular areas. And even with the school systems, I know my aunt has a daughter and we talk about redistricting school lines and how they’re trying to move kids from one school to another based on the composition of the community. White community trying to keep the areas white, so there’s a lot of racial stuff that I see and hear about on a regular basis in Atlanta.
Participants that lived in other parts of the South even recognized that education in Georgia appeared to be of a lower standard in comparison to other cities and states. Jordan states:

DeKalb County was more like Charleston at the time. Black people. A different kind of black people in the area. Different characters. A different mind-set….I guess it has a lot to do with lack of resources. Now that I'm older, I can look back and see, schooling was different. Education was not up to par....I actually went to private schools before I came to Georgia. It was a total difference. The attention span of the kids in school. Even the schools with no windows in it. That was a shock, coming from Charleston to here.

The desire for better education is so high in Atlanta, that some people are willing to accept gentrification and the displacement of poor blacks, so that more whites can move into their neighborhoods, which can result in more funding for schools. Zen, a working-class 23-year-old, had this to say about gentrification and education:

I’m enthused about it…Funding for schools will probably increase so better education. White people move in and hopefully the black people there can stay where they are.

I am not claiming that education alone will solve the race and class divide in Atlanta. My research shows that black people in Atlanta differ in class, perception of the city as a Black Mecca and place of birth. However, the one thing many of these people have in common is that across identities, they argue that access to quality education and encouraging multiple pathways to success (business ownership, job skills, college, financial literacy, life skills, etc) are key factors in improving the economic inequality, unemployment, abject poverty, and disadvantage found in Atlanta and the metro area.

10.2 Sociological Implications

Although much of my research focuses on the city of Atlanta and the surrounding metro area, I use the city as a testing site for larger racial and economic issues that exist in areas across
the United States. My findings can be linked to broader sociological implications that scholars should address when examining multiple levels of inequality.

To gain a more complete understanding of the black experience in the United States and the inequality that exists in black communities, an intersectional approach must exist in the research. Black people are not just raced, but they are gendered, classed, sexed and regioned. These multiple identities are expressed and negotiated when they come in contact with each other and people outside of their racial group. These multiple identities complicate the black experience in the U.S. and, researchers should explore them before enforcing policies that seek to make this country an equal and equitable place for one of its oldest populations. Intersectionality gives groups the opportunity to be fully human and allows people to recognize their diversity. It recognizes the multiple layers that exist in every community and forces onlookers to broaden their scope of understanding when exploring these groups. Although it is much easier to think of people as a monolith and legislate bills with that same framework, this approach does not move the country forward towards “a more perfect union”, but instead further divides groups and sub groups within and outside their racial category. Intersectionality gives voice to the distinct and unique pieces of diverse lived experiences that make us who we all are—human.

Another theory that scholars should explore within the racial framework of blackness is internalized racism. There is an enormous amount of historical and empirical research that elucidates the white/non-white racial binary. However, with residential and educational segregation at high levels, it is evident that there is a limitation in the interaction between whites and non-whites. Yet, racism still plays a major role in the life experiences of people of color. Therefore, research must begin to explore the racism that exists in the absence of white faces.
Systemic racism is one theory that can exist in the absence of white people and the academic discourse has accepted its philosophies. However, internalized racism is a concept that has not received much attention in relation to other racial theories. It is the medium that allows all forms of racism and inequality to exist and perpetuate (Pyke 2010). I argue that it is the last form of racism and is the most potent because it is the only type of racism that does not carry the face of the perpetrator. If scholars do not explore or carefully examine this theory, victims of racism look like the creators of racism and in-group division can ensue, while larger interpersonal and structural racial inequality continue to exist with little chance of resistance. Therefore, research should examine internalized racism within the context of systemic racism to show how characteristics of hegemonic white racism get forced upon blacks and reinforced consciously or subconsciously within black communities. Delineating internalized racism within the context of systemic racism allows researchers to see the full scope of this country’s racist effects, thus allowing us to create future theoretical frameworks that can abolish it. If scholars mishandle this theory, future research can create sociological conclusions that reinforce the racist system the discipline claims to seek to dismantle.

In addition to internalized racism, this research study also helps scholars understand the relationship between the black working class and black middle class. While class is typically determined by income, education and occupation, my research shows that identity is key when exploring the black middle class (Lacy 2007). It also helps research uncover the linked fate that exists between the two classes; a dynamic that does not exist in white communities. Although middle-class blacks can use their class privilege to combat racism, inequality and mistreatment, many middle-class blacks maintain close ties to their working-class family members, and in many ways are their financial source of survival. This responsibility makes it difficult for the
black middle class to achieve economic mobility or pass down wealth to the next generation, largely because they use their high incomes to pay off debt (student loans) needed to achieve upward mobility. What happens to their working-class and poor counterparts subsequently affects the lives of the black middle class. This linked fate across classes makes passing economically equal policies for blacks more pertinent. The maintaining of the middle class is the constant cry from political campaigns every four years. U.S. citizens see it as the strategy that will keep the economy afloat. Therefore, race and class-specific policies that negatively affect more at risk populations make the black race more vulnerable to downward mobility or economic stagnation than their white counterparts who benefit from generational wealth and a geographical and cultural separation from their white working-class and poor members.

Lastly, black Atlanta transplants across classes often see the city as a Black Mecca, and a place where black people experience class mobility. However, native black Atlantans across classes have seen firsthand the way the city, its institutions, leaders and resources have helped to popularize black progression, and maintain the black middle class while simultaneously reinforcing class division and economic disparity in the city. Even those natives who have and continue to benefit from Atlanta’s resources, clearly see or remember when the city consciously and/or subconsciously ignored their plight when they were among the disadvantaged. Many transplants don’t recognize this side as they often see the Atlanta dream from their far away cities and states, and continue in this perspective after they’ve relocated to the city and started their own journey towards success. Those transplants who move to Atlanta for school, business or entertainment aspirations can be so enamored by the Black Meccanisms that they often do not see the connection between their rise and the economic g(c)lass ceiling of their working-class and poor brothers and sisters in nearby urban and suburban ghettoes. Therefore, Atlanta should
create a city that promotes egalitarianism and equal opportunities across race and class lines. Equal access to various forms of education on the K-12 level is a significant factor in bridging the income gap across and within racial groups. Housing and job opportunities play a role in this education gap as they too should be analyzed and ameliorated when addressing this race/class divide. These factors are the first steps to taking Atlanta from the Black Mecca myth or legend, and making it a practical reality for all people.

10.3 Limitations of Research

This study is an ongoing attempt to further explore the relationship between race, class and the urban South. While my findings are founded upon an empirical analysis, I also recognize some challenges in my research. Middle-class participants were heavily represented in this sample. They make up almost three times as many of the respondents as the working-class participants. In addition, a large number of my sample also identified as women. Therefore, as I continue this research experiment, I plan to add more working-class respondents by recruiting in areas where I know they are more likely to congregate. Also, I plan to expand the male portion of my sample. Overall, my goal is to gather at least sixteen more participants for this study. Fifty total qualitative interviews will provide enough data to come up with solid conclusions for the research questions.

10.4 Future Research

Future research on race and class should explore the ways black people cope with race. Many of my participants admitted that they have and continue to experience racism and have reported traumatic racialized situations. Unfortunately, many of them do not know how to deal with racism, and cannot remember being taught how to handle inequality when they are confronted with it. Instead, the community teaches many blacks to deal with it the best way they
can in the moment. Future research should address the lack of professional and structural coping mechanisms when confronting racism and should conclude with charging federal and state governments to allot funds to black psychologists and mental health professionals who can create free programs and procedures that should be taught and utilized by blacks on how to deal with the traumatic impact of historical and contemporary racial issues. Future sociological research should also examine the way perceived class identity and actual class identity play a role in boundary negotiation. Most scholarship exploring the dynamics between these two notions exist in psychology research. However, social matters such as educational inequality, mixed-income communities and class perceptions can be addressed if the academy considered actual versus perceived class identities and the way it affects these issues. In addition, scholars should examine the further marginalized groups within the black communities such as the LGBT+ community and the way in which their identity negotiation further complicates the intraracial divisions that can exist in the black community. Lastly, I plan to end this research study by uncovering the way Atlanta is unique in terms of racial solidarity. While blacks across classes and identities may exhibit intraracial division and boundary negotiation, I argue that black Atlantans display a racial solidarity that goes overlooked in some of the research on race, class and identity. The racial uplift theory and the collectivist outlook is evident in my data as many black Atlantans across classes still consider themselves one racial group and often mention the need to work together in order to create a better future for black people. I argue that the racial progression and advancement put forth by the Black Meccanism of the city has helped to create a culture of unity among black Atlanta and has laid a strong foundation for considerable growth and connectivity across racial and economic boundaries.
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Interview Questions Outline

Interviewer_________________ Date__________________

Beginning time_______________ End Time______________

Demographics

Interviewee Number ___
Age: ___
Gender: ___
Highest Level of Education: ___
Class: Working class or Middle Class (Circle One)
Do you live in the city of Atlanta or outside the city limits? ______
If outside the city, which county? _____
Annual household income ___________
Household Composition _____________
How long have you lived in Atlanta _____________

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this study. I would like to ask some questions about your experiences as a child and adult in Atlanta. Also, I will inquire about your ideas and experiences related to race, racism and economic class. Your involvement in this interview is completely voluntary. You can refuse to answer a question or end the interview at any point in the dialogue. Your identity will remain confidential as I look to learn more about the African American experience in Atlanta. Thank you again for your involvement in this study and my last step towards obtaining my PhD.

________________________________________

To begin, I would like to ask you some questions about your racial and class experiences in Atlanta.

Race and Class in Atlanta
Where did you grow up?

What was it like growing up/living in Atlanta?

In what areas of Atlanta did you grow up?

Do you have any fond memories about growing up or living in Atlanta? Likes or dislikes

What role did race play in your upbringing?

Tell me about your neighborhood and community in terms of race. Can you describe the racial make up of your surroundings (school, job, neighborhood, etc)?

(Centrality) Explain the importance of race in your life.
Tell me about some early racial memories.

Do you consider Atlanta the south? What has been your experience living in the south?

How does living in the south play a role in your racial identity? What are some of your experiences being black in the south specifically?

While living in Atlanta, were there times you felt mistreated or differently due to your race? (If yes): Can you share some significant accounts of racism in your life or the lives of people close to you? (If no): Why do you think you were not a victim of racism and discrimination in Atlanta?

Growing up/living in Atlanta, how common was it to see successful, prominent and influential black people in leadership? (If common): Did seeing these images affect the way you saw yourself as a black person? How? Did it affect the way you viewed the black community as a whole? (If not normal): Why do you think these images were less visible to you?

Growing up in Atlanta, how common was it to see black-owned businesses? (If common): Did seeing these businesses affect the way you saw yourself as a black person? How? Did it affect the way you viewed the black community as a whole? (If not common): Why do you think you did not see a lot of black-owned businesses growing up?

Have you ever been employed by a black-owned business in Atlanta? Explain that experience.

(Resources) How important is it for blacks to patronize their own stores and businesses?

Atlanta is home to the largest consortium of black colleges in the nation. How has Atlanta as a hub for black education affected the way you see yourself as a black person or the larger black community?

Explain how often you came in contact with students, teachers or organizations from the black colleges? (If often): Could you explain those interactions and how they made you feel? (If not often): Why do you think these interactions were non-existent?

Atlanta is known as the Black Mecca. What does that mean to you?

It alludes to the idea that black people are able to move here and because of the education, political leadership, business opportunities and large black population, it is easier to become a part of the growing black middle class, move up in class status and take advantage of opportunities. How accurate is this explanation of Atlanta? Or do you think it is a myth? (If accurate): Explain how you have seen specific examples of Atlanta as a Black Mecca. (If not accurate): Why do you think this is a myth?
Can you think of any other cities that are better for black people than Atlanta? If so, what are they and why?

Atlanta is considered a Black Mecca because of its long history of black political leadership. How do you think having black political control impacts (you) and the city?

Currently, housing in Atlanta is becoming less and less affordable for African Americans due to city development. How would this idea of Atlanta as a “Black Mecca” change if non-blacks move back to the city?

How do you feel living in a city that is largely controlled by blacks?

Atlanta is becoming gentrified, meaning that the inner city is being renovated to appeal to middle and upper class. How do you feel about changes like the new stadium, the belt line and the demolition of public housing? Do you see these changes affecting Atlanta’s title as a Black Mecca?

What are your thoughts about the poorer neighborhoods that are being neglected in the city of Atlanta and metro Atlanta?

Even though gentrification can make property value go up and push poor people out of their homes, do you think it’s better for black people to gentrify these spaces? If so, why?

How do you feel these changes affect black and poor people in the city? How are these developments continuing racial and class inequality?

What are some of the biggest issues that the city of Atlanta needs to work on to make it a better city?

How do you feel about MARTA? How effective is it in terms of getting to work, school and different places in a city as big as Atlanta and metro Atlanta?

Although Atlanta is known for its large black middle class, it also has high levels of poverty. Why do you think the poverty rate is so high among blacks?
Why do you think it is so high in a city that has so many successful black people?

Do you think there is more poverty in the urban or suburban areas of the city? Which is worse and why?

Now, I would like to inquire about the way you look at economic class in our society.
Overall Class Identity

What label would you use to describe your economic level growing up? Growing up, would you say you were working or middle class? What makes you feel like you were a part of this class?

Tell me about your experiences growing up/living working or middle class in Atlanta.

How did living in a big city like Atlanta affect your desire to move up in class status?

How would you describe your current class position and why?

When some people think about the black middle class, they picture the Huxtables from the Cosby show? When you think of the black middle class, what comes to mind?

When you think of working class, what comes to mind?

How often do you interact with people outside of your class group? Explain those interactions.

Imagine you were invited to four parties---middle class blacks, middle class whites, working/poor class, working poor whites...rank the order--where would you feel more comfortable and why (strips of paper)?

Same thing with schools

Growing up, how comfortable were you around people within your racial group? How comfortable were you around individuals within your economic class? Explain which group you felt more comfortable with and why?

(If a further example is needed) Would you rather hang out with other African Americans that may not be able to afford to do the things you like to do, or would you rather be around people who can afford your lifestyle regardless of their race? Why?

What do you like to do for fun? (on my own—frame it as “acting white” or “acting black”)

Now, I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences and perspective on race and racism in our society.

Overall Racial identity

How did you learn to deal with racism and discrimination?

(Public Regard) How do you feel society treats black people as a whole? How does money change the way a black person is treated by the larger society?

(Private Regard) What are your feelings towards black people as a whole?

Tell me about any actions of racism or discrimination that you have experienced in recent times.

(Private Regard) How connected do you feel you are to the larger black community?
Explain the desire for diversity in your life. Is it more important to be around people that look like you or among a variety of racial groups?

(Decision-making) How successful do you think the black community would be if they allowed whites or other races to help them solve racial issues?

Explain how comfortable you are around people of your own race and individuals of your class status?

(Assimilation) How do you think the lives of African Americans would be if they maintained separate communities versus integrating and working within the larger U.S American system?

(Humanist) Explain how advantageous it would be for black people if they stopped recognizing racism and started to look past race and help form a post-racial society?

(Oppressed Minority Subscale) How selfish is it if African Americans looked past the concerns of other minority groups who have been oppressed and focused on their own problems?

(If very selfish): Why?

(If not selfish): Why not?

(Black Nationalist) Based on your experiences and knowledge about race relations in the United States, how likely will it be for blacks and whites to live in racial harmony?

(If likely): Why do you feel optimistic about this possibility?

(If not likely): Why do you feel this is not possible?

Now, I would like to ask you some questions about your views on African Americans in specific class groups.

View of the Black Middle Class/View of the black poor or working class.
Describe your feelings about middle-class black people?

How does money and success change the way black people feel about themselves and their people?

How do you think the black poor or working class feel about receiving assistance from richer blacks? Do middle class blacks have an obligation to help poor or working class blacks? Why or Why Not? Do you think middle class blacks doing enough so, why or why not?

Would middle and working class blacks living in the same communities help improve black unity in our society? How or Why not?

How responsible do you feel to your community? How responsible should black people in general feel to their race?

Lastly, I will ask some questions about your views on larger issues of racism.

Lager issues of Racism
How do you feel about the current state of race relations in the United States? Do you feel that it has gotten better or worse? How?
Explain why you feel some people have more resources than others. Are the same opportunities available for everyone to improve their lives?

How relevant is affirmative action in today’s society?

How do you feel about government assistance and people who live on it?

Why do you think unemployment is higher in black communities, than non black communities?

A recent report from the Annie Casey Foundation stated that 80 percent of black children in Atlanta live in poverty. Why do you think this is the case and how is this related to education?

In our current society, there is great tension between the black community and law enforcement. Describe your feelings towards the police and the larger justice system?

Some people claim that the victims of these highly publicized shootings did things to lead to their death (wearing a hoodie, arguing with the police, selling cigarettes, etc), what is your opinion on that stance?

How important is the voting booth as a way to combat racism and make your voice heard? Do you use it? Why or Why not?

**Black Lives Matter**

What do you think about the Black Lives Matter Movement (*and other organized groups)*?

What are the pros and cons of this movement?

Do you think the movement addresses some of the issues we talked about?

What organizations have you been a part of that share in their values of protecting black lives?

Is there anything else you would like to talk about regarding this issue?

Thank you for being a part of this study. If there is anything else you would like to discuss, please feel free to contact me at (904) 707-8916 or jonathanpaulgrant@gmail.com.