Beyond Capital High: On Dual Citizenship and the Strange Career of "Acting White"

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In this article, I reflect on the strange career of the "burden of 'acting White'" since it attracted widespread popular and academic attention over 20 years ago. I begin by noting that my original definition of "the burden of 'acting White'" should not be confused with a prominent misconception of the problem as the "fear" of "acting White." I then offer a revised definition that has emerged in the wake of the collision of meanings attributed to the Capital High study. At the core of the twists and turns this concept has taken is attempted identity theft: In exchange for what is conventionally identified as success, racially defined Black bodies are compelled to perform a White identity by mimicking the cultural, linguistic, and economic practices historically affiliated with the hegemonic rule of Euro-Americans. Third, drawing on recent work on the impact of gender-specific racial performances on Black males' and Black females' academic success, I analyze quantitative data from Capital High to explain the gender-specific response patterns of male and female students to the dilemmas implicit in academic success. Finally, I suggest possible implications of the centrality of the burden of "acting White" for the academic performance of Black students and the identity of African Americans more generally. [burden of "acting White," identity theft, racial insufficiency, gender insufficiency, Capital High, academic achievement]

As I was reflecting on what has become known as the Fordham–Ogbu hypothesis, or (mistakenly) the Ogbu–Fordham hypothesis, I was jarred by the anguish of a middle-class African American mother that appeared in an interview published in a recent Sunday edition of the *Washington Post*:

> Sam came home from the overnighter visibly crushed. He curled around his hurt as though he'd been punched in the gut, and he refused to say what had happened. My husband and I fought panic as all the horrible things that might happen to a fourteen-year-old away from home pounded through our brains. We cajoled and interrogated as he tried to disappear into the living room sofa, until finally enough of the story emerged to reassure us that our oldest son hadn't been physically injured. But his suffering was still real. His friends asked him why he didn't act black. [Payne 2007]

Sam's mother and father were "dumbfounded" by this accusation. How, in this post–civil rights era, could their privately schooled, 14-year-old, Black male child be accused by his similarly situated suburban White male peers of being "insufficiently Black"?[1] Don't his White male peers know, as his mother asserts, that there is no such thing as "acting black"? She acknowledges that both she and her husband had confronted similar accusations when they were their son's age, but not from White students: Their Black peers had accused them of "acting White." In the wake of the civil rights revolution, how could her son's schoolmates be so racist? How could these elite White males compel Sam to choose between being either "insufficiently

masculine or insufficiently black" (Young 2007:92)? Sam's mother was horrified. Her conjoined denial and ambivalence toward one of our culture's most widely known but most deeply embedded taboos voices and, perhaps, unintentionally reinforces the racial sensibilities that damage Black children and youth the contemporary United States. The paradoxical turn of events that Sam's mother reported invited me to revisit my earlier research on race as performance, also known as "acting White."

In this article, I trace the strange career of this concept over the two decades since it originally attracted widespread attention. I begin by reminding us of my original definition of the *burden of "acting White,"* which should not be confused with the fear of acting White (Fordham 1985; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Next, I offer a revised definition that has emerged in the wake of the collision of meanings attributed to the study. At the core of the twists and turns this concept has taken is attempted identity theft. Third, drawing on recent work on the effects of gender-specific racial performances on Black males' and Black females' academic success (Ferguson 2000; Macleod 1995; Morris 2006, 2007; Ogbu 2004, 2008; Young 2007), I present a quantitative analysis of the ethnographic data to explain the differentiated response pattern found in the academic practices of male and female students at Capital High. Finally, I suggest possible implications of the centrality of "acting White" for the academic performance of Black students and the identity of African Americans more generally.

Since the initial publication of "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the Burden of 'Acting White' " (Fordham and Ogbu 1986), I have been compelled to make periodic "cameo appearances" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004) both to legitimize and to decertify the claims of an army of other researchers and journalists to ownership or replication of my thesis. Academics in disciplines ranging from psychology (Neal-Barnett et al. 2001a, 2001b), sociology (Horvat and O'Connor 2006; Morris 2006, 2007; Tyson 2002), economics (Tyson et al. 2005; Ferguson 1996, 2000; Fryer with Levitt 2004), education (Cosby and Poussaint 2007), journalism (Tough 2004), religion and cultural studies (Dyson 2005), policy studies (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1997, 1998), law and politics (Norwood 2007; Obama 1995, 2006), religion (Dyson 2006), literacy (Young 2007), and even anthropology (Ogbu 2004, 2008), as well as popular media such as *Time Magazine, CBS Nightly News, Washington Post, New York Times, Boston Globe, Toronto Star,* and *London Times* have cited and reported my work in ways that paralleled neither my anthropological research nor my published findings. These researchers and journalists have certainly added to the debate. Indeed, in some instances they have enhanced my work (see, e.g., the psychologist Neal-Barnett et al. 2001a, 2001b; Young 2007; and my collaborator, Ogbu 2004, 2008).

Nonetheless, the popular notion of asking African American high school students whether their peers accuse them of "acting White" is not what I had in mind when I concluded that the students at Capital High were "coping with the burden of 'acting White.' " The senior economist, psychologist, and sociologist who coauthored "It's Not 'a Black Thing': Understanding the Burden of Acting White and the Dilemmas of High Achievement," published in the *American Sociological Review* (Tyson et al. 2005), removed the concept from its cultural context and stripped it of its racialized meanings. The coeditors of the recently published book *Beyond Acting White* (Horvat and O'Connor 2006) go so far as to condemn the concept as an ahistorical, "folk" version of a racist ideology regarding Black inferiority, although some of the article authors acknowledge that the problem still exists in school settings. None of these critiques has

convinced me that the burden of acting White has disappeared or is only a school-based phenomenon; indeed, that is just the opposite of the message I intended to convey.

Others' appropriation, distortion, or supposed refutation of the theoretical claims that emerged from my Capital High study are professionally unacceptable, yet hauntingly familiar. My angst was exacerbated by the fact that many alpha males and some females, in both academia and the popular media, repeated my observation, but without attribution. Researchers and pundits, whether they were self-defined as multiculturalists, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., Barack Obama, Michael Eric Dyson, William Darrity, and Derrick Bok, or neoconservatives, such as John McWhorter, Bill Cosby, Roland Fryer, Shelby Steele, Thomas Sowell, Christopher Jencks, and Meredith Phillips, all avoided the central points of debate by mutating, even mutilating my analysis. They did not acknowledge that it was based on the concept of race as a forced performance on the part of African American students or admit that the structural limitations based on race that are still an endemic feature of U.S. public and private life make Black youths' oppositional culture a reasonable response to their bleak prospects. Instead, they proceed immediately to the misguided notion that the adoption of a stronger work ethic on the part of the Black population, especially Black children, would render these long-standing structural deterrents to social and economic inequality harmless. The pathologies these researchers have identified as endemic within the Black community could easily be erased, they argue, if Black people would just behave better and take responsibility for themselves.

This kind of rhetorical balm came first and most famously from the popular comedian and television personality, Bill Cosby. Like most proponents of this point of view, Cosby focuses on what he identified as the inadequacies within the culture of Black people, especially their parenting and child-rearing practices. The book he coauthored with Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, called *Come On, People* (2007), is filled with diatribes against the practices of poor and not-so-poor Black people. These assimilation-oriented bromides soothe the growing discomfort of the dominant White society while, at the same time, compelling Black people who are victimized by these limitations to use their nonexistent bootstraps to lift themselves out of the hell hole that is their social reality.

Ironically, although the members of the multiculturalist camp start from a different place, they, like the neoconservatives, also argue that the source of what they see as Black dysfunctionalty is primarily localized within—not outside—the Black community. Responding to the same general question—what must be done to improve African American students' academic performance and eliminate the systemic impoverishment of Black people?—they, too, place the major responsibility on the Black community itself, ignoring the formidable structural barriers that defy the nation's rhetorical idealism. Michael Eric Dyson, for example, takes Cosby to the woodshed— and rightfully so—arguing that he is a Johnny-come-lately racial critic who "beats up on the black poor for their horrible education, their style of dress, the names they give their children, their backward speech and consumptive habit" (Dyson 2005:4). Yet, at the same time, Dyson resoundingly dismisses the findings of my ethnographic study, labeling it "a single study in a Washington, D.C. high school." Parenthetically, I am not sure how many I should have done before releasing my findings. He asserts:

> Fordham and Ogbu's study has gained iconic status in the anecdotage not only of Cosby but of figures like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in the pages of the *New York Times* and Barack Obama

in his thrilling keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic Convention. . . . The trouble with such citations is that they help to circulate and give legitimacy to a theory that is in large part untrue. [Dyson 2005:86]

Dyson and others outside the discipline of anthropology have summarily dismissed the validity of my long-term ethnographic study, which included two years of participant-observation and more than a year administering a 55-page questionnaire to more than 700 students at the school. To make sure that my point of view was not captive of students' self-reports (after all, there are often major discrepancies between what people think they ought to say and what they actually do), I observed students in their classes, during after-school activities, in their homes as they did homework or opted not to do homework, and at church and other community activities (see Fordham 1996). Instead of looking at what students actually do and examining how they interact, the domain in which the "burden of 'acting White' " is acted out, these scholars have, instead, highlighted surveys in which students are asked about their personal opinions. For example, Cook and Ludwig (1997, 1998) at Georgetown University analyzed the verbal responses of 25,000 students who participated in a survey that the researchers did not conduct; he (Dyson) also offers as evidence the work of sociologists and economists—but not anthropologists.

As male researchers often do, these alpha males only cite the work of other males whom they think share their academic status and intellectual clout. In my case, they gave credit to Ogbu where credit was not due, entangling him in my research in a way that made him uncomfortable. He had lent his name to this article to help me get my work published even though I had not yet completed my dissertation because he thought the findings were important, not because he shared my analysis. Indeed, he realized—as many others did not—that I, as an African American whose ancestors were enslaved, was bringing a cultural dimension to a theory that he, as an African immigrant, had constructed as a transnational comparison of educational and economic opportunities.

When John Ogbu died in 2003, I was silenced and made invisible. His dominant status and accomplishment both propelled and subverted my efforts to make my own way in the field. Some ambitious graduate students would have phrased their contribution as a critique of the reigning theory; instead, I sought to graft my own insights onto Ogbu's framework and extend it in a different direction. When our article was initially published with my name preceding his, researchers and reporters repeatedly referenced it as Ogbu and Fordham instead. Both Ogbu and I were chagrined by this error, which seemed impossible to rectify. This mistake was not deliberately vicious; it arose from the common assumption that the professor helps the student, rather than the student helping the professor. It had taken great effort on both our parts to change the power dynamics in our work on the article. The public entanglement that followed exaggerated and outlasted our actual collaboration. Despite Ogbu's assertion that this article was his "most cited work," toward the end of his life he sought to parse the differences between our viewpoints (for further exploration of these issues, see Fordham 2004, 2007; Ogbu 2008). Revealed posthumously, this process of differentiation was—and remains—acutely painful. We would have been able to collaborate more fully and for longer, had our distinct contributions not been conflated by others.

Sandwiched between these two powerful feuding male-dominated camps as well as my former mentor and friend, I tried unsuccessfully to respond in opinion pieces, letters to the editor, and proposed journal articles. In addition, I sought funding for

several new projects. But no one appeared to want to hear from the researcher whose study was at the center of the "acting White" storm. Once my work was in print, I no longer had a say in how it was interpreted. Because I am sensitive to the perennial critique that theory building, at least in anthropology, is male dominated (see Lutz 1995; Behar and Gordon 1995), I shuttled back and forth, back and forth between entertaining and denying this possibility. Perhaps, by venturing into an area reserved for males, I had violated the rules and deserved to be punished by having my voice silenced in the debate that I had generated. Because I am well aware of the persistent class and pedigree bias in the academy, it was possible that my nonelite class status and lack of Ivy League credentials facilitated my consignment to the backstage.

None of the people who critiqued my work and basked in the glow of the academic spotlight in what is known in the 'hood as an academic smackdown—not one single researcher—has ever even attempted to replicate my study. Why bother? Replication would be far too difficult and time consuming. Call it a study of "acting White" and then dismiss the ethnographic work of Fordham (and Ogbu). I shudder and try to move on.

The Original Definition

African Americans who are accused of acting White are inevitably displaced, becoming conscripts in an army of one. Perceived as matter out of place, every American of African ancestry who opts to perform Whiteness, even episodically, is forced to fight to retain citizenship in the Black community while concurrently seeking acceptance by the hegemonic White society. This compulsory dual citizenship, with one segment being the site of privilege and the other a sign of stigma, produces the phenomenon I defined as acting White at Capital High and Young (2007) describes as racial and/or gender insufficiency on the part of Black males in school and, by extension, the larger society. (I argue that this racialized gender insufficiency is also a reality for Black females.) Gender, a major cultural category, which is ubiquitous across all racial and socioeconomic classes and, as Best (1983) found in her study of elementary students in Montgomery County, Maryland, an identity that must be embraced before one is able to fully master the school's obligatory academic skills set. African Americans are expected to perform Whiteness in isolation from their peers and without a supportive, gendered social network.

At Capital High, African American adolescents generally verbalized their definitions of "acting White" in behavioral terms: speaking standard English (also known as "talking White"); going to the Smithsonian; having a party with no music, or dancing to the lyrics rather than the beat; studying hard; going camping; hiking in the mountains, and so forth. These practices were seen as a Black body performing Whiteness. Today, within the African American community, "acting White" is generally used as an epithet to convey the response of African Americans to the institutionalization of norms and other cultural practices that are generated and imposed by the dominant society. Performing Whiteness indiscriminately—especially in the presence of a predominantly Black audience—is widely perceived by Americans whose ancestors were enslaved in this country as a violation of their Black citizenship. Capital High students labeled this response as acceptance of White U.S. social dominance, which most of them wanted to reject. Students were consciously and unconsciously seeking ways to avoid both dominating their Black peers and evading domination by these same peers

because, in the predominantly Black school context, acting White was most clearly manifested in having power over other Black people, a burden reeking with identity conflict. This issue was critical for Black students and a deterrent to their academic excellence because the school's core curriculum was perceived as "racial text" (see Castenell and Pinar 1993), requiring undesirable alterations in their perceptions of an appropriate Black performance.

These verbal and behavioral responses captured only a small portion of what my student informants meant, however. My incessant observation confirmed the need for a broader definition of the problem. Black students at Capital High understood that acting White celebrated an ethic that was enshrined in the school's curriculum and that, as Black people, their own futures were constructed in ways that differed from those of their White cohorts. Required to fulfill White cultural norms, they still might be excluded from the economic and social rewards of academic success. Their "stolen" White identity (aka attempted identity theft) was double sided: Black high achievers were compelled both to be and not to be socially White, to respect and retain their citizenship in the Black community while struggling for recognition in the dominating White society. Many sought to convey the impression that they were not concerned with academic excellence—if only as a cover for their real ambition.

Acting White epitomizes the strangeness of being concurrently erased and embraced; displaced and calcified, perceived in both instances as matter out of place. Regrettably, most people erroneously perceive the problem of acting White as being only a school-based phenomenon. Consequently, researchers predictably blame the victim, holding low-achieving Black students responsible for burdening their more successful peers. They fail to acknowledge that for African American students, academic achievement is particularly challenging because, despite their historical exclusion from America's one remaining obligatory institution, they are compelled to be indistinguishable from their White peers. In choosing to write about Black students' academic success, rather than highlighting once again their failure in school, I deliberately attempted to counter the hegemonic representations of Black youth. Focusing on those who were successful, I asked about the strategies they used to achieve in the terms recognized by their school and, equally importantly, the psychological costs affiliated with that success (see Fordham 1988b).

With 20/20 hindsight, I now know that while writing about what I learned in my earlier research, I inadvertently continued the practices I had learned early in life: Black out what is too painful to admit yet too hellish to absolve. When I was a little girl growing up in the U.S. South amid the moss, mosquitoes, and magnolias with the haunting perennial presence of racism, my parents and other African American adults generated Black America's second emancipation, the civil rights movement.

In the wake of this historical cataclysm, my classmates and I became fish out of water. Our social death did not come instantly, however. It took a while, and the U.S. system of compulsory public education was critical to the process. Surviving in this new sociocultural context became my generation's test. We often chose to resist by conforming. Because our individual achievement was heavily dependent on how closely we resembled other academically successful students and our teachers, I learned to "act White" or perform Whiteness by hiding those aspects of me that did not fit: my dark skin, my rounded facial features, my arrogant hair, my Black accent. I sought to mimic these other practices as I saw them manifested by my White peers. In fact, my schooling compelled me to be "blacked out" of my own life. I stood out as

Black only when I sang in the glee club, played basketball on the girls' basketball team, and danced at the sock hop. The rest of the time, I was compelled to perform Whiteness (in a forthcoming article, I describe this practice as merely "passin' for Black" [Fordham n.d.b]). Ironically, like the rest of my peers, I accepted unconditionally the conundrum of the racialized firewall: Some people were White and therefore always right; other people were Black and therefore could not get it right. There was—and there still is—no in-between position in the public imagination. Black students in my generation were compelled to perform Whiteness to achieve academic success. I was surprised to discover that the generation of Black students who grew up in the wake of the second emancipation was similarly situated. In reporting what I learned during that research (see Fordham 1982, 1988a, 1988b, 1993a, 1993b, 1996, 2004), I tried to capture these deep fissures and schisms among the students while focusing on their academic achievements. Many scholars and the overwhelming majority of the media did not follow my lead. Academic failure was the centerpiece in their construction and analyses of the problem.

Acting White as Racial Performance

The study of racial categories, including their intersections with gender and class, has been the centerpiece of my academic work and the issues around which I have sought to inform social policy and educational practice. In my own research, I argue that covertly under slavery and overtly after the first emancipation, Black people regarded performing Whiteness as characteristic of those group members who resisted affiliation with Blackness, with the slave experience, and with other Black people in exchange for the token successes awarded by White owners of enslaved human bodies. This strategy compelled an uncritical resistance manifested as conformity to dominant social and cultural practices, norms, and mores. In other words, in an effort to gain social and cultural acceptance, also known as assimilation, people of African ancestry sought to be indistinguishable from those Americans who were identified as White in every aspect of their lives (see, e.g., Frazier 1997). Nevertheless, despite their blinding conformity, dominant Whites deemed this response inappropriate because it negated the well-established postulate that the fundamental social and cultural practices of all descendents of Africans had a bodily basis and were conveyed unaltered from generation to generation. A similar response was evident during the second emancipation with a twist: "Acting White" was now compulsory for all, rather than only a favored few, and resistance manifested as conformity rather than avoidance. But the outcome was the same: marginalization and alienation from the most valued social positions, careers, housing, and schooling.

In revisiting what it means to have to "cope with the burden of 'acting White,' " I seek to explicate how the official and unofficial expectation that Black youth and other youth of color perform what is imagined as Whiteness both in and outside the school context is simultaneously resisted and, paradoxically, embraced. At the core of acting White, as I initially envisioned it, is the idea of behaving as if one were entitled to what is considered integral to being a U.S. citizen: living in any neighborhood one desires; matriculating at the school of one's choice; being able to obtain the job that one desires and that meshes with one's skills; marrying the person of one's choice without regard for his or her racial identity; voting without any additional qualifications beyond residence and citizenship. In short, in the context of U.S. racism and stratification,

"acting White" was an act of collective self-assertion, claiming as rights what has previously been reserved as privileges for Whites only. For African Americans, it means unconditionally embracing the institutions and practices that were treated as the prerogative of White Americans and declared off limits to enslaved Africans and their descendants.

Today, "acting White" is a scripted, even racialized performance, the goal of which is—perhaps unconsciously—something approximating attempted identity theft, not in the colloquial sense of stealing someone's credit card or bank account information but, more critically, in exchange for what is conventionally identified as success, racially defined Black bodies are compelled to perform a White identity by mimicking the cultural, linguistic, and economic practices historically affiliated with the hegemonic rule of Euro-Americans. In other words, the wholesale appropriation of a society's hegemonic social and cultural personae—its identity—by another group. Why? In this case, it's not necessarily because African Americans hate or reject their own social group, although some critics suggest that self-hatred is a factor. "Acting White" is the embodiment of what U.S. culture has historically defined as success and quintessentially American. Significantly, what the culture defines as success and as "the" U.S. identity continues to be the prerogative of those who are White, as well as male. To put it bluntly: *White* and *Whiteness* are synonyms for power.

I want us to reflect on how a racial performance, in this case a gender-appropriate version of "acting White," might also be seen as a social process in which language and other aspects of expressive culture (e.g., music and dance, dress and demeanor) are deployed to demonstrate that the individual actor does not belong to the traditional White image of the Black community or, colloquially, the hood.

What I know as a researcher is diametrically opposed to my knowledge and experience as a professor. This is as true today as it was when I did the research at Capital High so many years ago. The primarily self-identified African American students whom I have observed and interviewed over the years report being confident and outgoing when they entered school but, over time, became more uncertain about their academic abilities and, simultaneously, racked with doubts about how they should comport themselves in school to be perceived as capable of academic success. Students who are evaluated by the school as unsuccessful are especially likely to feel this sort of self-doubt and confusion. Many report that this evolving self is generated, at least partially, in response to their observations regarding what behaviors and practices are rewarded and punished among their classmates, but most emphasize that the most powerful factor is their teachers' expectations and treatment of them.

In striking contrast, my experience as a professor has taught me that the elite students I teach are burdened with the notion that they have so much to teach the less fortunate—the students whom I study. They are forced to hold onto this position even when these "unfortunate peoples" resist and reject the gifts the students I teach are prepared to offer. Indeed, my students tend to see their path to sainthood as being contingent on their ability to transform the lives of these lower-class, economically disadvantaged peoples by compelling them to know what they know, to behave like they behave, to think in ways that approximate the way they think, and to have desires and goals that are just like theirs. As a nontraditional professor, my goal is gently to compel them to rethink their assumptions and to learn from students whose major sin is that their parents are low-wage workers or underemployed workers.

Two factors have been most striking as I have observed the misconstruction of the "burden of 'acting White' " by other scholars and by journalists. First is the widespread practice of blaming African Americans themselves, rather than racism or structured inequities for the underperformance of Black students (Horvat and O'Connor 2006); second is the common displacement of the word <u>burden</u> in the phrase and its replacement by another word that is not a synonym: for example, "fear" as in the "fear of acting White" (Horvat and O'Connor 2006). *Burden,* which suggests having to carry a heavy load, is free of the emotional dimension that fear implies. *Burden* suggests suffering, with or without fear; fear indicates anxiety but is often disconnected from suffering.

Economists, educators, anthropologists, and a wide array of other intellectuals have debated whether "acting White," or race as a performance, exists at all and whether and how it functions as a deterrent to Black students' academic success. Economists such as Darity at North Carolina and Ferguson and Fryer at Harvard are actively seeking ways to quantify what it means to act White or to be perceived as acting White, a strange idea from my perspective. For example, Fryer claims that, by using network analysis, he discovered that when Black students' GPAs rise above 3.2 their popularly falls precipitously, a response not found among similarly situated White students (Fryer with Levitt 2004). Although this finding, if true, would be interesting, the econometricians' approach does not capture the central issue I discovered in my research at Capital High: the relationship between academic performance and a commitment to a Black identity.

I am repeatedly frustrated by the practice common among academicians of refusing to interrogate the structures of power and trying, instead, to find a mathematical equation to describe and explain "acting White." The problem of privileged or protested Whiteness and stigmatized or devalued Blackness being tied positively and negatively to school performance is a sociocultural phenomenon that must be seen in relation to institutional structures and cultural dynamics. Reflecting my frustration with the recent revival of the idea of blaming the underachieving peers of high-achieving Black students for limiting their academic performance, I published an article that posed these questions: Was Rosa Parks guilty of "acting White" that day in Montgomery when she refused to give up her seat to a White man who boarded the bus (Netsky 2006)? When the other Black passengers did not initially support her because she was upsetting the imposed and customary order of race relations—the racial etiquette that governed seating on the public bus—and they feared White reprisals against the whole Black community, were these passengers responsible for the insult to her dignity? Most reasonable people would agree that, like the Black people on the bus with Mrs. Parks that day, the less successful Black students are not the major obstacles to the elimination of the Black–White achievement gap.

Like every Black person on that bus, all African American students are victimized—regardless of their academic performance—by social policies and educational practices that challenge their humanity and aspirations. Their responses, I argue, are generated and maintained by an organizational structure that rewards this kind of dysfunctionality. How ironic that in the current debate about the Black–White academic achievement gap, we overemphasize the influence of students who are not doing well academically on the performance of Black students who are successful. At the same time, we fail to examine the configuration of power on the bus and by extension the society at large and underemphasize the power of the social

configuration of the school, especially racialized academic tracking and teachers' low expectations of Black students' academic performance. In the terms I constructed to explain what was occurring at an ostensibly integrated urban public high school, Mrs. Parks was guilty of acting White. Her defiant refusal to accept the socially and legally mandated dehumanization of Black people in Montgomery led her to act as if she were entitled to first-class U.S. citizenship, with all the rights and responsibilities that implies. Her decision to remain seated when she was expected to stand up and move to the back triggered a cascade of collective, public acts of resistance to segregation, securing access to public transportation, desegregated schooling, and the vote for a host of minority groups. "Acting White" can be an act of protest.

When I began the Capital High study in the 1980s, I assumed that the racial performance documented by researchers such as E. Franklin Frazier (1997) in *Black Bourgeoisie* and Audrey Kerr (2006) in *The Brown Bag Principle* (as well as my own personal school experience) had disappeared in the wake of the social, cultural, and economic changes ushered in by the civil rights movement. I was forced to rethink my initial assumptions and begin the burdensome task of documenting how a gender-differentiated pattern of "acting White" was still the gold standard of racial performance at the school and the urban area in which it is situated. What I did not fully appreciate was that labeling what I had observed and documented at the school as "acting White" was tantamount to throwing gasoline on a fire in a super-charged, oxygenated room. The explosion singed everyone and everything in its path, including me, and generated a debate that has been ongoing now for over two decades.

Public reaction to the very first article written regarding my research, which I coauthored with John Ogbu (1986), was so extreme it caught me by surprise. It seemed to me that every reporter and news organization in the country called me and wrote about my work, although often quite inaccurately. Elsewhere (Fordham 2004, 2007), I have described this collaborative relationship, including its dysfunctional aspects, and lamented that, toward the end of his life, Ogbu was seeking to distance himself from a hypothesis that was always more mine than his.

Fast forward to the contemporary context, and a few things have changed—but so much remains the same. To succeed in school, Black bodies cannot be 'hood identi-fied. Indeed, the school and the 'hood are diametrically opposed social spaces, exist-ing, it seems to me, in different state systems. As Ogbu points out in his posthumous book, the thesis in our famous (or infamous, depending on your perspective) article was not that acting White means that "Black students do not want to and are not striving to succeed in school" (2008:16). Rather, we argued that the burden of being accused of acting White is "*one major reason* black students do poorly in school . . . pri-marily because they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success" (Fordham and Ogbu 1986:177). Moreover, we argued, "acting White" is associated with what was historically thought to be the prerogative of White Americans. Schooling is only one of those prerogatives; access to stable, well-paying jobs is another. In a situation in which these formerly "White" prerogatives are simultaneously made available and denied, Black youth tend to respond with uncertainty and ambivalence, hence the burden. In some situations, a collective oppositional Black identity emerged. Because a Black identity is at the core of the response to the accusation of "acting White," I cannot embrace the strange idea supported by recent researchers (such as Tyson et al. 2005) that the problem of "acting

the school community" (trans., "making the institution attractive and respectable so that others will desire to attend and support it") and for giving up a myopic preoccupation with individual, academic achievement. In the hegemonic society, this positioning of Black males means that they are rewarded for not competing with White males for dominance in academic achievement. They are primarily competing with other Black males for the finite number of positions on sports teams at school and later for the much smaller number of positions on college and professional teams. Black males—or, at least, the few who typify athletic success—hold a unique status as the school's visible public representatives, and their imagined hypermasculinity makes them female magnets. This success is what even high-achieving males desire. As Paul, a high-achieving, nonathletic male, puts it:

> I swim occasionally, I was on the swim team but. . . . I developed a permanent allergy to chlorinated water. (Laughter). . . . I was joking. It's just that I really didn't think I was benefiting the team, considering that I would be disqualified as soon as I dived off the diving board. I don't know how to dive. In order to swim in the swim meets, you have to be able to dive, and you get disqualified if you don't dive in properly. And I'm not one of the best athletes; I mean I'm not into athletics. School. . . . I'm trying to explore other areas, and find out—I want to be good at *something.* Everybody's good at *something,* and I hate to think that my best thing is school. [Interview, January 13, 1983]

In looking back at the interview that I completed with this precocious young man, I am convinced that he realized he did not embody what it means to be male—as idealized in the (adolescent) Black community. As a 14-year-old 11th grader, a child prodigy, who graduated third in his class, Paul is seen as loquacious, tall, dark, and handsome. His verbal and linguistic skills are unmatched by his older peers. On the surface, the above lamentation appears to be bloated with adolescence or teenage angst, a sign that he needs counseling or some other form of adult intervention. The goal: to determine why he is dismissive of what we are told is the culture's most valued social skill: academic performance. Nevertheless, despite these numerous social and academic skills . . . his inability to perform what he sees as the ultimate marker of masculinity—representation in the school's public sports arenas—compels him to conclude that he is "insufficiently masculine" (Young 2007:92).

   Both the centrality of gender and the importance of being "insufficiently Black" (Young 2007:92) to academic achievement became crystal clear when I did a preliminary analysis of a random selection of the quantitative data I collected during my research at Capital High. Here, I focus on the random responses of about 100 students, 9th- and 11th-grade males and females, both high achieving and underachieving, to a question regarding race and gender identity. It read:

   89. If someone asked you to describe yourself, what would you say *first*?
        a. I'm an American
        b. I'm a young person (teenager)
        c. I'm black
        d. I'm male (or female)

The "Strangeness" of Black-Identified Male Children

   In both the dominant society and the Black community, maleness is a privileged identity. Even in childhood, males' power to chart their own course in life is less

constrained than that of females. Both Black and White males share the privilege of biologically defined maleness and the power ascribed to it, albeit unevenly. But the similarity ends right there. The hegemonic notion of childhood in our culture embraces the notion that boys are "naughty by nature" (as reported in Mintz 2006). However, because children who identify as Black and male are widely represented primarily as Black, rather than as male—because race functions as the master status— they are often denied access to the reigning hegemonic notion that "boys will be boys." This externally imposed interpretation undermines their right to be positioned as children and entitled to "boylike" behavior.

According to Vershawn Young, young Black males in schools and other public institutions are compelled to choose between two unacceptable options: "being insufficiently masculine or insufficiently black" (Young 2007:92). Indeed, until the second emancipation (see Fordham 1996:44–53), most Black males did not have any choice at all; Blackness was externally imposed on them. Given these options, academic failure and Blackness appear to be correlated. First, among the high-achieving ninth-grade male respondents, the most frequently chosen response was *MALE.* In fact, none of the respondents chose *BLACK* as their first option. I found this response pattern somewhat surprising, but at the time I assumed that maleness was the desired option because these respondents were prepubescent and were trying to claim a gender identity. However, when I looked at the responses of the similarly situated 11th-grade respondents, the same undifferentiated pattern emerged: they, too, overwhelmingly chose *MALE.* None of the ninth- or 11th-grade high-achieving males chose *BLACK* as the primary way he wanted to be identified.

The response pattern of the underachieving males at the 11th-grade level was quite different. Although they were not as uniform in their selection, the most frequently chosen option was *BLACK* rather than *MALE.* Among Black male students, then, it is Blackness and not maleness that is most rejected in school. We must ask how the culturally appropriate male gender practices supported in the Black community filtered through the lens of the primarily White and female teaching and administrative staff are misunderstood and subsequently translated in ways that undermine academic achievement. Indeed, the response pattern at both grade levels fits what Young describes as opting to be either "insufficiently masculine or insufficiently black" (2007). He reflects on his own Black male experience of academic success:

> It wasn't race that I tried to reject. I just didn't want to be black. So I worked against developing ghetto masculine characteristics and I learned to act and talk as a white man. It didn't take me long to discover that in the right environments, especially at school, that the more I acted white, the more I seemed to succeed. In fact, becoming a high school English teacher and getting a PhD was a way for me to validate my anomalous black identity. It was also my way of claiming to be effeminate not because I was or wanted to be gay but because I was smart. [Young 2007:104]

Initially, I was not able to explain this male response pattern. As an African American female, I lacked the appropriate gender knowledge to help me understand why the successful male students chose *MALE* rather than *BLACK* as the primary way they desired to be identified. Young's analysis helps me to understand both the academically successful African American males' response pattern and why their strong desire to confirm a male gendered identity might be seen by school officials and other nonmembers of the Black community as prima facie evidence of "adultification," that

is, the premature desire to claim adult status (Ferguson 2000). At the same time, they fail to see how the hegemonic meaning of childhood might be fueling this pattern.

The "Strangeness" of Black-Identified Female Children

Just as athletic prowess is the primary mechanism Black males are encouraged to use to signal that they are sufficiently masculine—in and out of school—the most visible way Black females indicate gender sufficiency while at school is through what is known as "talking White." Springer's (2002) personal history is a case in point. She writes:

> I could never seem to pass the Talks White/Talks Black [test]. My test always came back stamped "talks white" and I was therefore cast out of the inner circle of blackness. This construct of how black and white people are supposed to talk has never been used as a compliment. Accusing someone of talking white lacks the historical specificity of calling someone an "Uncle Tom," but it highlights how race is constructed within black communities and how we use it against one another. [Springer 2002:73]

Not surprisingly, the mismatch between the culture of the Black community and the school has unacknowledged gender dimensions for women as well. When responding to the question about race and gender identity, the high-achieving ninth-grade females and all 11th-grade females, regardless of achievement level, most frequently chose, not *FEMALE* but *BLACK.* In this respect, they resembled the low-achieving 11th-grade males. I had anticipated this response, which signaled that African American students viewed a Black identity as a master status. The females were not as unanimous in their selection as their male peers, but the contrast between all girls and high-achieving boys was striking nonetheless. Femaleness merged with Blackness was most often rejected in school. This response pattern is a direct inversion of what is expected of their Black male peers, suggesting a modification of Young's assertion when it is extended to females: that to achieve academically, African American females must be either "insufficiently female or insufficiently raced."

We are all aware of the relative academic success of Black females. But their success has blinded us to the costs incurred. The culture of women-centered Black communities often supports early female autonomy, which is in direct conflict with the infantilization of females in the larger society. Black females' perceived "gender insufficiency" and "adultification" have a very different meaning for them because, although males—regardless of race or ethnicity—are encouraged to be autonomous and nondependent, females are encouraged to remain dependent, especially on males, throughout the lifecourse. Parenthetically, is the female-specific parental advice "be nice" shorthand for "be powerless," let others take care of you? However, when young Black women are compared with young White women, rather than with young Black men, the differences are broader. Indeed, the visibility of Black girls—bodies whose skin color is distinctly different from that of other females—are often perceived as "loudness," although the quality is entirely unrelated to the level of their voices or the focus of their discourse (see Fordham 1993b). Like their male peers, Black girls are generally seen as too worldly for their chronological age and prepared for essentialized female adult roles, rather than nourished academically. For example, Linda Grant's (1984) work in recently desegregated schools highlights how Black girls are rewarded for what is presumed to be their adult roles as mediators, caregivers, and

enforcers. Grant's assertion that they are not rewarded for their academic skills is reinforced by the work of other researchers, including Schofield (1989).

Black families that encourage young women to become independent, to take care of themselves, may be unwittingly exacerbating a mismatch between the home-based and school-based definitions of the behavior that evidences maturity. Within Black communities, young women are evaluated relative to gender-specific standards that focus on a woman's ability to be assertive, to demand respect from others, and to take responsibility for those who depend on her. Adult women expect respect from adult men and children of both genders, and they support older and younger people, male and female, in their extended family networks. As a girl matures, whether she is "grown" and deserving of the respect and autonomy due to an adult woman is evaluated relative to such a standard.

This standard almost certainly comes into conflict with the behavior expected of girls in many high schools, earning Black girls a reputation as "loud" and "out of place" (Fordham 1993b; see also Weitz and Gordon 1993) or "loudies" (Morris 2007). White female teachers—most of whom come from middle-class, racially seg-regated backgrounds—often expect female students to be relatively compliant, rather than self-assertive, and they reward those who conform to those expectations with good grades and encouragement to achieve academically. Those who do not conform meet not only with sanctions against their behavior but also with negative evaluations of their intellectual potential and discouragement of their academic and occupational aspirations. This mismatch creates a serious dissonance in Black girls' lives between achievement at home and at school. Some Black families and social networks endeavor to help young women negotiate between these two divergent and often conflicting worlds, but the burden remains on them, not on the school.

My recent field-based study is an ethnographic examination of female self-assertion and relational aggression across and along racial lines (Fordham n.d.a). Located in a suburban high school with a significant minority population in the Rochester, New York, area, this project fills a void in the scholarship on female competition by empirically documenting how race merged with femaleness shapes perceptions of aggression and, by extension, academic performance among Black and White female students. This project documented the cultural mechanisms that compel girls to learn, by the time they reach puberty, to eschew competition with their male peers and limit their competition to other girls, especially to girls who are defined as "other." This practice permits and promotes the reproduction of Black subordination within the female-specific social hierarchy. Using an ethnographic approach, with both participant-observation and in-depth interviews, the work examines how cul-tural differences relating to race lead to miscommunication between teachers and students and teachers and mothers; how teachers' expectations that Black girls are aggressive, or even bullies, shape those girls' social and academic development; how the discourse practices of Black girls inhibit their academic success; the circumstances and contexts in which teachers, Black and White, reward Black girls academically and how Black girls respond to praise and criticism; what social and cultural behaviors associated with Black girls their teachers find unacceptable; and how Black girls learn—and can be helped to learn—most effectively. With its deliberately comparative perspective, this study explores how gender-specific practices from different social groups collide, with specific focus on the ways in which the socially constructed

categories of race, gender, and ethnicity intersect and reinforce the ongoing degradation of women.

This new study and my reanalysis of the data from Capital High, taken together with other research, make clear the difference between those economists and psychologists who only count outcomes and seek to explain the patterns they find through variables within their data sets, as Darity and Fryer do, and those anthropologists and sociologists, myself and Ogbu included, who seek to probe the complex, dialectical processes through which racial inequality is reproduced in schools and other social institutions. I am especially concerned about the current practice of confining the examination of "acting White" to the school environment and the matter of valuing or devaluing academic achievement. This approach leads almost inevitably to the sad conclusion that what we have among today's African American youth is the academic equivalent of Black-on-Black violence, as young people who seek to affirm a Black identity in the face of societal stigmatization taunt those who seek to succeed in school. By this account, we are witnessing the violent death of a generation's dreams for achievement because of a ghetto culture that centers on asserting and defending a "Black Self" in the face of rampant disrespect.

Within the prevailing misinterpretation of my hypothesis, this conclusion seems startling, and perhaps even out of order. But, as I originally defined the idea, "acting White" included embracing a Black identity and claiming a whole array of rights and privileges from which African Americans are routinely excluded on the grounds of race. Resistance could take the form of excelling, not just that of rebelling. Although my research was centered in a high school, its scope was much larger. Following standard anthropological research practices, I treated the school as the "village" center and presented a wide-ranging analysis of the cultural practices of the group. For the African American youth I studied, "acting White" was associated not with a deviation from Black cultural norms but with claiming what was historically thought to be the prerogatives of White Americans. Schooling was only one of those prerogatives; access to stable, well-paying jobs was another.

At the 2nd Annual Youth and Race Conference, cosponsored at Duke University and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, October 28–29, 2005, which was devoted to reexamining, or even debunking, the problem of "acting White," the planners misinterpreted my argument and, like so many others have done before, limited their scrutiny of this phenomenon to interactions among students in school. They relied exclusively on students' self-reports to prove—or, rather, disprove—the existence of this problem, as if it could be reduced to the "teasing" that goes on among adolescents regardless of race. Such a methodology is indefensible and produces bad social science. Looking only at students' interactions with one another, not at their interactions with teachers and at the mismatch between the culture of the home and community and that of the school, narrows our view. Not surprisingly, this move redefined the problem out of existence. These scholars' decision to leave unproblematized the categories embedded in their quantitative data make it impossible for them to address cultural issues, especially the role of Black identity that was central to the ethnographic analysis I presented. Moreover, their predisposition to see their data as definitive led them to leave unchallenged—indeed, even unnoticed—both the sociocultural patterns that are inevitably embedded in dominant institutions where "White culture" is taken for granted as "the" culture and the double vision that people of

African ancestry must possess to navigate between competing, overlapping sociocultural contexts.

In a situation in which schooling—especially learning to read and write—and other formerly White prerogatives are simultaneously made available and denied, Black youth often respond with uncertainty and, in some circumstances, a collective oppositional Black identity emerges. Because a Black identity is at the core of the response to the accusation of "acting White," I cannot embrace the idea proposed by recent researchers that all high-achieving students, regardless of race, are stigmatized and subjected to ridicule and exclusion by their lower-achieving peers.

In a more sophisticated analysis of the "acting White" phenomenon, Roland Fryer, an economist at Harvard, acknowledges that his data demonstrate the existence of this problem at public high schools in which Black students form a substantial minority. His analysis shows a rudimentary understanding that the problem is relational: that is, it shapes networks of association and rankings of "respect" and "popularity," not just how individuals position themselves and interact directly. The patterns he traces are group-level systems. His analysis also demonstrates that context matters: the problem is worst in schools where students of color form a sizeable and visible minority, especially where class differences between Black and White students are also marked. So this work points back toward Ogbu's framework. He understood that the school does not exist in isolation from society, even though he never quite understood that African Americans who attained success by "acting White" paid a price by silencing their own voices and becoming alienated from their community.

Conclusion

As an anthropologist, I am grateful for the attention given my earlier work and, at the same time, baffled by its widespread distortion. Because what is being discussed regarding "acting White" both in academia and other venues tends to highlight work conducted by researchers who are committed to quantitative analyses, I seek to correct this imbalance by trying, once again, to highlight the centrality of ethnography, the theoretical and methodological work affiliated with anthropology and anthropologists. Ethnography scrutinizes patterns of human interaction, rather than numerical data. Long-term, laborious fieldwork enables us to make the shared social practices in everyday life the object of analysis. That is the nature of the work I completed at Capital High School some 20 years ago, and the recently completed 2.5-year study of female competition. The Capital High study has never been replicated. Period. The absence of a focus on the contextual meanings of a Black identity and the assumption that valuing academic success is the sole criterion for what is meant by the idea of "acting White" means that much of the research that goes by this name is about something else entirely.

As social scientists, we can help others understand that people of African ancestry are not their own worst and most powerful enemies. In my anthropological study of academically successful students at overwhelmingly Black "Capital High" in Washington, D.C., I found that all Black students were alienated by the mismatch between the culture of their community and that of the school. Some resisted by refusing to comply with assignments, whereas others resisted by defying their teachers' low expectations and becoming academically successful. All Black students paid a price: some by dead-end educational and occupational careers, and others by losing their own voices.

I offer this narrative as a way of contextualizing what I understood most of the students at Capital High to be suggesting in their description of what it meant to "act White" in a system of schooling embedded in a racialized, capitalist system, compelling us, ultimately, to consider whether performing Whiteness—or Blackness—is a pyrrhic victory fueling and refueling the strangeness of "acting White."

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Notes

1. Although it is AAA style to lowercase the terms *black* and *white,* I have elected to capitalize them as proper nouns.

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