

# EVERYDAY ANTIRACISM

## *Competence and Religion in the Cultural Repertoire of the African American Elite*<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This exploratory study makes a contribution to the literature on antiracism by unpacking the cultural categories through which *everyday antiracism* is experienced and practiced by extraordinarily successful African Americans. Using a phenomenological approach, we focus on processes of classification to analyze the criteria that members of the African American elite mobilize to compare racial groups and establish their equality. We first summarize results from earlier work on the antiracist strategies of White and African American workers. Second, drawing upon in-depth interviews with members of the Black elite, we show that demonstrating intelligence and competence, and gaining knowledge, are particularly valued strategies of equalization, while religion has a subordinate role within their antiracist repertoire. Thus, gaining cultural membership is often equated with educational and occupational attainment. Antiracist strategies that value college education and achievement by the standards of American individualism may exclude many poor and working-class African Americans from cultural membership. In this way, strategies of equalization based on educational and professional competence may prove dysfunctional for racial solidarity.

**Keywords:** Antiracism, African American, Religion, Competence, Elite

In “Black Men and Public Space,” journalist Brent Staples (1992) wrote of his habit of whistling Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* when walking outside at night to signal that he is an educated, middle-class African American and not, as some might fear, out to snatch purses. For his part, in the first few pages of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois described how, throughout his life, he dreamed of demonstrating his equality with Whites “by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in our head” (1903 [1969], p. 44). Although living in very different worlds,

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these two men point to a common challenge faced by many Blacks—that of escaping White contempt and of countering racist stereotypes. How African Americans cope in everyday life with the stigma of Blackness is a topic that has been largely neglected to date. Drawing on in-depth interviews with members of the African American national elite, this article explores the particular tactics used by Blacks to rebut White racism. It advances our understanding of everyday antiracism by drawing on the distinctive analytical tools of cultural analysis to examine the salience of religion and competence as elite African American antiracist strategies. These are examined against the strategies used by African American workers documented elsewhere (Lamont 2000).<sup>2</sup>

The main analytical purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the range of repertoires that Blacks use to counter the ideology of White supremacy by demonstrating to themselves and to others that they are on equal footing with Whites.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, what do Blacks identify as common denominators across races? What principles do they invoke in order to demonstrate the similarity, commonality, or compatibility of racial groups? Drawing on the writings of Bruno Latour (1987) on how to make facts “resistant,” we examine precisely what kinds of evidence or “proofs” Blacks use to establish the legitimacy of their antiracist ideology.

Our purposes are best specified by considering the questions we asked members of the African American elites. We probed whether they believe that Blacks and Whites are equal, and if so, what are the bases upon which they justify their antiracist perspective. Further, we examine how they have coped with racism in their personal and professional life, what they view as the most and least successful strategies, what they have taught their children concerning how to cope with racism, and what advice would they give to Black youth concerning this challenge. After identifying inductively the categories that are most salient in response to open-ended questions, we asked more specific queries regarding respondents’ evaluation of religion, competence, education, and the display of faith as antiracist strategies. We also questioned them concerning whether they would encourage specific tactics such as promoting colorblindness versus affirming cultural differences.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, we aim to assess whether the antiracism of elite African Americans favors particularism or universalism. We examine this by asking whether “it is natural to help your own kind”, whether they believe that Blacks should help Black people first, and how they understand the relationship between racial and human solidarity. We also probed whether they believe that they share something essential with other Blacks and what this consists of. This line of questioning is designed to unpack who is included within the community of reference toward which they express solidarity (Blacks only, humanity as a whole, or other categories such as “American”). We also ask whether they believe that racism is intrinsic to human nature (for Blacks and for other racial groups) with the goal again of testing the limit of their commitment to universalism. We then explore whether their criteria of cultural membership within American mainstream society are particularistic and largely limited to specific subsets of the population—the middle class for instance—or expansive and available to all.

These questions provide points of entry for unpacking the cultural categories through which everyday antiracism is experienced and practiced by extraordinarily successful African Americans.<sup>5</sup> This topic has been largely neglected to date, in favor of examining broader, macro-level antiracist practices within organizations or social movements—those strategies implemented during the Black power era or in contemporary antiracist NGOs for instance.<sup>6</sup> A study of everyday antiracism helps us understand how people *bridge* boundaries—the frequently neglected counterpoint to the more often studied topic of social exclusion. This inquiry is informed by an

overall research agenda centered on the study of commensurability, that is, of how units that are constructed as different from one another are made comparable.<sup>7</sup>

Our focus here is properly phenomenological since we center our attention on the criteria that underlie the comparative evaluations of groups. Instead of analyzing racism *per se*, we frame this project within a general sociology of processes of classification and ordering.<sup>8</sup> This sociology of classification involves focusing on ordinary thinking about what constitutes heterogeneity and similarity within and between groups. Our larger research agenda takes inspiration from Erving Goffman (1963) who shows how individuals with discredited or “spoiled” identities take on the responsibility of managing interaction to prevent discomfort in others.<sup>9</sup> Note that we do not presume that Blacks are constantly engaged in managing the stigma of race or that they are obsessed with demonstrating their equality to Whites. We simply focus on this aspect of their identity work for the purpose of this research while acknowledging that often Blacks “don’t give a hoot” about what White folks think of them.

It should be noted that, but for a few exceptions, the vast sociological literature on American racism has not considered fully the ways in which Blacks experience, understand, and subvert White contempt. Sociologists interested in Blacks’ experience with racism have often been more concerned with denouncing injustice than with uncovering the cultural frameworks through which African Americans understand and deal with racism. The tools of cultural sociology present us with a unique opportunity to move the discussion in a more analytical direction, as we hope this article demonstrates convincingly. This task is particularly urgent at the present juncture. In the age of affirmative action, when racial barriers to achievement have been ostensibly removed, post-civil rights African Americans are, more than ever, confronted with the challenge of producing an inclusive discourse that can foster greater cultural membership for all people of color—not only the college educated.

We define antiracist strategies as the micro-level responses that individuals use to counter racist ideology in their daily life. For African Americans, education and professional competence have both been critical tools for racial uplift—particularly among the Black middle class (Hine 1989). For these upwardly mobile individuals, demonstrating competence and ability is a central strategy for combating racism. Alternatively, religion is also an important strategy in managing racial stigma. Much has been written on the ways in which the Black church has helped African Americans cope with racism (Frederick 2003; Higginbotham 1993). Providing a network of solidarity as well as the promise of happiness in the afterlife, the church acted as a cultural buffer against the stigma of race and, in some cases, worked to mobilize Blacks against discrimination. Significantly, this institution supplied the Civil Rights Movement with an ideology, resources, members, and a rhetorical style (McAdam 1998). Black theologians such as James Cone and Albert Cleage played an important role in diffusing an understanding of the Gospel that recognized and affirmed Black humanity (Wilmore 1972). More generally, over the past century, the Black church has rooted the principle of racial equality in the moral authority of God’s words, thus providing Blacks with tools for spiritual empowerment and presenting a nonracist version of the Christian faith (Long 1997; Paris 1985; Wills 1997).

Lamont’s (2000) work on the African American working class showed that this group is likely to use a wide range of strategies to justify its antiracist claims to equality, which includes pointing to their common characteristics as “children of God,” to their common physiology, or to the universality of human nature, as we will see in the next sections. Religion does not have a privileged place within this broad tool-kit of equalization. A similar diversity of arguments is found in interviews conducted with members of the African American elite such as Nikki Giovanni,

Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, and Chancellor Julius Chamber, to which we turn afterward. The prime antiracist strategy they say they use consists in demonstrating their intelligence and competence, which involves showing that racist stereotypes do not apply to them and/or that they are unfounded, and that they personally (and/or Blacks more generally) can outperform Whites. In short, this group establishes its cultural membership (or racial equality) by giving evidence of conformity with norms of American individualism, particularly that of work ethic and competence. We conclude with a discussion of whether this class-based strategy implicitly denies membership in mainstream America to the Black working and lower classes. We argue in favor of a more universalist strategy that would ground cultural membership in the most inclusive standards.

## AFRICAN AMERICAN WORKERS

The way in which Blacks and Whites define personal merit and worthiness plays an important role in how they perceive boundaries between racial groups and justify their antiracist ideology. Lamont (2000) examined the role of religion in the antiracism of African American workers. This research drew on 150 in-depth interviews conducted with randomly sampled blue-collar workers and low-status, white-collar workers living in the New York and Paris suburbs. In the American case, interviews we conducted with thirty Blacks and forty-five Whites concerned a range of topics, but most centrally, the criteria they use to decide whom they associate with. This study explored inductively how workers concretely define the boundaries between “us” and “them” and draw the lines between the worthy and the less worthy, thus mapping concrete manifestations of particularism and universalism. The interviews showed that workers, Black and White, emphasize morality as a criteria of worth, and that Black workers more readily use religion as a proxy of moral character than do White workers.<sup>10</sup> For instance, John Robinson, a union representative who works at a GM plant in Rahway, expresses this succinctly when he says “[r]eligious people is people that got a heart, that care for people, regardless of what color you are, they care for what’s going on around them. . . . Religious people is people that believe in the family, don’t believe in bad things. . . . If you’re not a religion person, you believe in anything, good things and bad things.”

Similarly, Abe Lind, a plumber on Long Island, chooses his friends on the basis of whether they “believe in God, to a large extent, [because] that’s who they answer to, and they treat people fairly.” For these men, being able to use clear signals to distinguish between good and bad people is a crucial survival skill in the dangerous world in which they live, as pointed out by John Lamb, a recycling technician from Georgia who recently moved to the North. He describes his friends in the following terms: “We basically have the same background. . . . Baptists who have a lot of respect for people, believe in just doing the right thing. . . . They are ‘family-going people,’ people you can trust. . . . That’s not like the average person you meet in the street, that you gotta second guess.”

If working-class African Americans often use religious or spiritual participation to establish people’s value, they also use it to explain similarities and differences between Whites and Blacks—pointing to the fact that Blacks “feel the spirit” differently, for instance. But there are other, much more salient differences. White workers define people’s worth by emphasizing what Lamont (2000) called the “disciplined self,” i.e., one’s ability to work hard and uphold one’s responsibilities. Black workers also stress this disciplined self, but they place more value upon the “caring self” and

a collectivist conception of morality that centers on egalitarianism and giving back to the community. While many Whites see Blacks as lazy and contrast their work ethic to that of this group, Blacks see Whites as domineering and contrast them with their own solidarity and warmth. Each group perceives the other as lacking with respect to the specific universal moral rules they embody and privilege most. Hence, disciplined and caring selves are the moral grounds on which racist beliefs obtain their legitimacy.

## ANTIRACISM AMONG THE BLACK AND WHITE WORKING CLASS

As they drew the line between the worthy and the less worthy, there were, to be sure, White workers who expressed antiracist positions: they privileged two types of arguments to demonstrate that Whites and Blacks are equal, and these relate directly to earning ability and human nature. Just as racists use work ethic and self-reliance to criticize Blacks, antiracists suggest that earning capacity acts as an equalizing force (i.e., “if you can buy a house and I can buy a house, we are equal”). Thus they view market mechanisms as being the ultimate arbitrator of the personal value and worth. Antiracist Whites also argue that good and bad people are found in all racial groups. In the words of Billy Taylor, a White foreman employed in a cosmetic company:

I could have a problem with you as a Black but I could have the same problem if you were White, or green, or yellow, or whatever. People are people. There's good cops, there's bad cops. There's good Whites, there's bad Whites. . . .

These criteria—earning ability and the universality of human nature—are also central to African American antiracism. However, in contrast to Whites, Blacks also mobilize a large range of “proofs” that are not used by Whites. Most important, they point to their ability to consume to demonstrate their equality with Whites (see also Lamont and Molnar, 2001). They also emphasize their competence, as evidenced by John, a Black recycling plant worker in New Jersey. He says:

Basically it comes down to, once you prove yourself that you're just as good as [your White coworkers] . . . that you can do anything they do just as well as them, and you carry yourself with that weight, then people respect you, they kinda back away from you. I'm kind of quiet, I just go there, I don't miss a day on the job, I do what I gotta do, and I'm one of the best throughout the whole plant at what I do.

Black workers also rebut racism by adopting a number of universalistic strategies that are available to all, independent of level of education, income, or civil status. They provide evidence having to do with Whites' and Blacks' shared status as children of God, common physiology, and similar human needs. The constant reminder of the stigma of race in their daily life can most likely account for the more expansive character of their repertoire of antiracist arguments, especially when compared with that of Whites.

### Antiracist Arguments and Religion

Working class Blacks do use evidence drawn from the Bible to demonstrate that we all share something fundamental.<sup>11</sup> For instance, Abe, the plumber, points to the diversity of creation to demonstrate that the races are equal. He wishes that “people

would realize that we have one creator, and not many creators, and as there are many different colors of birds, and trees, and fishes, and everything that cross this globe [there are different types of people].”<sup>12</sup> Similarly a Black Jehovah’s Witness draws on Biblical themes when he says: “Where has a man come from, but the dust of the earth? If we look at the dust of the earth, we’re all of color.”

Unexpectedly, the Black workers who were interviewed do not ground racial equality in the view that as human beings we are equal before God—that divine grace is in all of us.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, like Whites, Blacks do not suggest that racial inequality results from God’s will, although this view remained popular during a good part of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, religious arguments are appealing to them in part because they offer a useful counterpoint to racist evolutionary accounts, according to which Blacks would be lower on the scale of human development. The best evidence for this is provided by a photo technician who combines evidence regarding God’s creation (“we all come from Adam and Eve”), physiology (“we all come out one way”) and lineage that stresses common descent (“family of man”<sup>15</sup>) to refute racist, evolutionary views. His strategy of antiracism aims at demonstrating that he, as a Black person, is no closer to apes than are Whites (saying that there is no ape in his family tree). Note that pointing to our common physiology adds “incontestable”—empirically grounded—proof of the wrong-headedness of racism.

Other Black workers point to similarly uncontestable facts when they note that “we all spend nine months in our mother’s womb,” that we all have the same red blood running in our veins, or that we all have ten fingers.<sup>16</sup> Yet others point to common needs (we all need to eat and work) and American citizenship to demonstrate their cultural membership, and implicitly, equality between the races within our territorial confines. This view was not expressed among Whites and goes unmentioned in survey-based studies of antiracism, which focus on structural and individual explanations of inequality (Apostle et al., 1983). In this plethora of antiracist arguments, religion is present, but not particularly prominent, especially when compared with market arguments (“money makes us equal”), arguments about competence, and human nature arguments. This in itself is an interesting finding given prominent stereotypes about the cultural distinctiveness of African Americans, particularly concerning the salience of religion in their worldviews.

By looking specifically at how workers define similarities and differences, including racial ones, we are able to identify the presence and absence of different arguments that have gone unnoticed to date. For instance, we find that Whites and Blacks alike use evidence drawn from everyday experience—such as the common-sensical view that human nature is universal—to rebut the notion of racial inequality. Their rhetoric is in stark contrast with that produced in academia, and popularized by school curriculum debates, which stresses multiculturalism or cultural diversity—arguments never used by workers. Perhaps the latter appeals less to workers than to professionals due to their desire to keep the world in moral order and to distinguish clearly the boundaries between what is permissible and “normal” and what is not. By producing increasingly sophisticated criticisms of essentialism and of available universalistic assumptions about human nature, the social sciences may be moving further and further away from the forms of antiracism that are most widely available to, and used by, the population at large.

### The National Elite

We turn our attention to the antiracist strategies of the African American elite. Using sociometric measures, Howard Taylor and colleagues constructed a sample of 167

Black leaders who were identified by other elite members as belonging to this highly selective group in the mid-1980s (for details, see Jackson et al., 1995). These individuals represent a wide range of professional and successful elites, including executives, politicians, military officers, heads of philanthropic organizations, media, entertainment and sports figures, as well as leaders in the field of higher education. We conducted phone interviews with ten of these individuals, including the poet Nikki Giovanni, the congressional delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, the civil rights lawyer Julius Chambers, the former United States Ambassador to South Africa, James Joseph, and Thirman Miller from Hartford, Connecticut, who was the first Black mayor of a New England town.<sup>17</sup> We draw on their accounts to develop an understanding of the antiracist strategies adopted by highly successful African Americans. We explore how they go about establishing their cultural membership in mainstream America. Here we briefly discuss early findings in an exploratory way.

A first striking observation is that this group rarely grounds human equality in religion. Only one of the leaders we talked to did so: Thirman Miller, who drew on Biblical themes when he said:

We're all God's children as one. . . . It was only Adam and Eve to begin with and all generations came from that beginning. And I think if you look at the way we're spread out . . . it's basically where we landed that made the difference in our complexion and our color and our hair texture and all those other things . . . We talk about the differences between, you know, Latinos and West Indians, whereas we all basically came from the same groups in Africa. We could be interrelated by blood.

Interestingly, Miller is the only elite respondent who is not college educated. Other interviewees in this group are more likely to ground racial similarity in standards supported by scientific knowledge. It was the case notably for a federal judge who, when asked what is the difference between Blacks and Whites, sternly and simply answered: "phenotype." Also implicitly drawing on scientific knowledge, the poet Nikki Giovanni points to our status as members of a common species. Combining this theme with that of social justice, she explains that "the species is one" by which she means:

Life is equal, and if you lose it, you want to lose it to accident. . . . You don't want to lose it through hatred because somebody doesn't like the way you look. You don't want to lose it because somebody has an uncle who needs a job and they decide to kill you to get it. . . . You have an equal right to your life, as do all living things.

Even William Howard, a pastor, framed his antiracist arguments in scientific, rather than religious, language. Noting his belief that Blacks and Whites are "equal by nature", he mentions in passing that "Professor Cohen, the paleontologist from Harvard, says that there was more difference within a racial group than there was among racial groups."

Several respondents are highly critical of using religion as a means of combating racism. Eleanor Holmes Norton derides "praying oneself out of segregation" and advocates instead litigation as a more effective strategy, as does Julius Chambers—in his words, "you try to communicate, and if it does not work, you sue." Betty Lou Dodson suggests that religious appeals risk "preaching to the choir" and may ultimately be ineffective antiracist strategies: "Unless that message is being delivered in

a religious forum which consists of Whites, it doesn't matter." Others, such as Nikki Giovanni, emphasize the shortcomings of religious institutions as facilitators of antiracist ideology in the civil rights movements. She reminds us: "The church was a big bulwark, the church was a part of the leadership, but some of the preachers were cowardly, you know that too. Some of the preachers hid behind the fact, "Well I'm a preacher and I don't want to upset the apple cart. . . ."

These exploratory interviews clearly suggest that religion is not particularly salient in framing how members of the African American elite conceive of successful antiracist strategies.

## **COMPETENCE AS AN ANTIRACIST STRATEGY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ELITE**

Generally, elite African Americans emphasize intelligence, competence, and education as the most effective antiracist strategies, frequently identifying these qualities as their "ticket" out of social exclusion. This common theme animates the responses of both Delegate Norton, who coped with racism by showing that "you can out-do them, you can outlearn them, you can be smarter than them" and of James Joseph, an ambassador, who took to heart his mother's warning that "you have to be twice as smart to get half as good a job." Elaborating on this theme, Eleanor Norton says she would offer this advice for young African Americans coping with racism:

I would say ignore White people . . . that will help you lose your race consciousness and concentrate on yourself and on excellence. . . . There's a way in which people become intimidated by thinking that they have to prepare themselves for racism. It's there, much of it you can't do anything about, except what our forefathers always told us, outdo them. . . .

Betty Lou Dodson suggests a similar strategy of competency, saying:

I think the first thing that you do is to make sure that you know what you're doing. . . . I always used to say to my staff, knowledge is power. . . . So you try to learn as much as you can about whatever it is you're doing. . . . you master as much knowledge as you possibly can, whatever situation you find yourself in.

## **THE CHALLENGES OF CLASS-BASED RACIAL EQUALITY**

Given the centrality of demonstrating intelligence and competence and gaining knowledge as strategies of equalization, the main challenge for reaching the most inclusive definition of cultural membership possible for the greatest majority of Blacks is not to ground the latter in class-specific characteristics such as the college degree. References to the importance of intelligence and knowledge may suggest that racial equality is more readily achieved for African Americans who are college-educated than for those who are not. And indeed, several interviewees point to their college education as a crucial resource in their strategies to disprove racist stereotypes. Significantly, some also expressed sharp class-based distinctions in their discussion of race relations. They may more readily stress class distinctions across all



racial groups than inequalities and differences between racial groups. For instance, when asked if he thought there were differences between Blacks and Whites, a prominent Black judge offered the following response: “I mean are you talking about people in the same classes, are you talking about people in the same location, vocation, or [level of] education? I’m not clear about meaningful predictable differences predicated on race.”

Similarly, Betty Lou Dodson, who emerged from a solidly middle-class family states, “I see more of a class distinction between people in the sense than I do a racial distinction. I always have.” For Dodson, who attended an all Black university, this sensitivity to class and her strategic commitment to education and professional competence translate into a feeling of superiority toward lower-class Whites. Remembering the days when she was growing up, she says:

There was Howard University . . . and there was a sense of Blacks that they really were well-educated people with a tremendous race consciousness. Many of the White people were from Maryland and Virginia—hillbillies—we didn’t think a lot of their intelligence. They didn’t give us any sense of inferiority, despite the segregation of the schools. . . .

These interviews suggest an overall tension between equalization strategies (or more specifically, antiracist strategies) grounded in a class-based individualism and strategies that posit universalistic principles for equality available to all. College education, knowledge, and the cultural capital of the elite are not, of course, universally attainable. These are standards of cultural membership that can be more easily met by middle-class people than by members of any other groups, as sociologists of education studying social reproduction have clearly established (e.g., Fischer et al., 1996).

Members of the African American elite face the challenge of reconciling the lessons they learned from their own success in dealing with racism with that of developing equalization strategies that do not leave behind African Americans who do not belong to the middle class. Anchoring their own cultural membership in their capacity to achieve by the standards of American individualism (most often measured in terms of academic achievement and professional mobility), Black elites risk reinforcing boundaries that put the African American working class and poor outside the bounds of “people like us” toward whom most Americans share feelings of obligations and collective responsibilities. A broadening of our collective definitions of cultural membership may be a challenge not easily met, given the stereotypes about ability and work ethic that are associated with the African American phenotype in our society.

Lamont and Molnàr (2001) interviewed African American marketing executives who believe that they are equal to Whites because they can buy luxury goods, i.e., drink Rémy Martin, wear Brooks Brothers, and drive Cadillacs.<sup>18</sup> These marketing executives believe that money, not competence, acts as a passport to gain cultural membership in American society: “Money is green,” as one of them puts it. Similar to several elite members we interviewed, these marketing specialists implicitly sustain the notion that not all Blacks (nor all Americans for that matter) can achieve cultural membership, since it is primarily available to “successful people.” This is at odds with the goal of fighting racism for all Blacks and of working toward the improvement of the race. While scholars are attempting to provide answers to this challenge, the tension remains.<sup>19</sup>

## UNIVERSALISTIC AND PARTICULARISTIC VISIONS OF CULTURAL MEMBERSHIP

Incidentally, a similar tension between a commitment to universalism qua antiracism, and a particularistic vision of cultural membership was also present in responses to the question about whether “it is natural to help your own kind.” Some respondents provide a very universalistic answer to this question. According to Nikki Giovanni:

It depends on what you're calling your own kind. We're all our own kind. Most likely, if I was at the zoo and a kid fell over into the rhino pen, I might reach down and help him. I wouldn't say, oh it's a White kid, let the rhino eat him, I'd try to help. But if the kid fell into the lion's pit, it's going to be, oh damn, that kid's going to get eaten because I'm not going to jump in the lion's pit! If it's my kid, I will, but not anybody else's. But our kind is, I mean that's what it's all about, our kind. I think you help who you can, who you believe in. . . . But if you're saying, oh my God, I really don't think that girl can sing, but I should hire her for my nightclub because she's Black, that's crazy.

In contrast, Thirman Miller says that it is natural for Black people—for people of color in fact—to want to help one another:

just as natural as it is for the Irish, Jews and anybody else to, . . . People ask me why is it necessary to have an NAACP or a Black Mayor's Conference or all these things. . . . I say [it's] because we have unique situations that we have to deal with. . . . The people of color have gone through some very particular struggles that others did not face. The Jews had the Holocaust, but that lasted and was ended and everything went fine. Racism has not ended for people of color. . . . And the same basically with the Latinos. These things that bring us together are common things that sort of segregate us from the world as a whole because we had simple issues that we face just based on the color of our skin, regardless of where we go—we find it in Europe, we find in the United States—wherever there's a large White community we still face racism.

This particularistic stance also contrasts with Congresswoman Norton's more nuanced position. When asked whether “it's natural to want to help your own kind,” she said:

If you live among people, it's like your own family. You naturally help your own family. [But] the Greeks believed that the highest form of morality was to help a neighbor, so that's not so natural. To help somebody who is outside of the group, there you get to really civilizing notions. . . . White people found Black people way away from them, certainly didn't want to help them, wanted to hurt them.

However, Norton believes that Blacks should help Black people first because “there is a racial obligation that is first and foremost, when you have the outstanding problems we have in our community.” From this it does not follow that Whites should help White people first. She views racial solidarity among Blacks as well as racial solidarity of Whites toward Blacks as two forms of universalisms, based on the principles of need and altruism.

Whites are not in a group in need of help in the same way. I don't think that White people should help White people first because I don't believe there's any mirror image of the experience of White people and Black people. I think that, in some way, White people ought to help Black people first, given that they live in communities where there are virtually no problems. You know, Black people have special problems that are inherited from slave status and from discrimination; they have an obligation to get rid of their own problems. Therefore, they've got to help their own people get rid of their own problems first. White people have no such inheritance, have no such legacy. So I wouldn't think they have any obligation to look around for some White people to help. Look around for some Americans who have been less fortunate to help, those might be poor White people, they might well be Black people.

We see that the impulse of racial justice leads members of the African American elite toward more or less encompassing communities of "people like us," and toward various understandings of cultural membership and collective responsibility. Here again, there is a tension between an impulse toward universal equality and the need to address the problems distinctive to African Americans—just as the challenge of a universal African American antiracism butts against the behavioral standards prescribed by the American ideals of individual achievements. It remains to be seen how frequently these tensions are found, and how they are felt, by other members of the African American elite. Further interviews will bring answers to these questions and may perhaps inform the moral quandary they raise.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing on the analytical tools described at the beginning of the paper, our first aim was to enrich our understanding of the forms taken by the everyday antiracism of the African American elite. We hope to have shown convincingly the heuristic payoffs of our inductive approach, which consists in documenting the categories through which members of stigmatized groups go about rebutting the stereotypes they encounter as they demonstrate their equality by mobilizing various standards of worth. We also wanted to bring attention to the problematic articulation between universal strategies of equalization and class-specific attributes. Our analysis raises the question of whether the norms of individualism dominating American culture ineluctably constrain African American antiracist rhetoric. Perhaps the positions taken by Norton, Miller, and Giovanni reveal only a small segment of the spectrum of the existing repertoire of antiracist evidence used by the African American elite. Their positions correspond to those identified in an analysis of ten autobiographies of prominent Black academics, athletes, entertainers, political figures, and religious leaders. These were surveyed to identify how individuals thought about, and have dealt with, the problem of establishing equality with Whites. We found that the most popular strategies used by individuals such as Frederick Douglass, Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Robeson, Henri Louis Gates, Jr., Arthur Ashe, and Jackie Joyner-Kersey, combine universalistic arguments that point to religion or the universality of human nature, with particularistic arguments having to do with the use of class and education as strategies of equalization—and these particularistic arguments were more frequently used by those who came of age after the Civil Rights Movement.

This exploratory article probably opens more questions than it answers. Much more thought needs to be given to the conditions under which the most inclusive

definitions of cultural membership can be promoted, so that disconfirming anti-Black prejudices does not come at the price of drawing stronger boundaries against African Americans who do not meet the usual American standards of success. If highly successful Blacks use antiracist strategies based on competence in ways that marginalize the lower classes, it may be that they themselves face difficulties in gaining cultural membership under any other terms. The role of latent discrimination and the constraining forces of American individualism could intersect in ways that make more inclusive strategies of equalization both ineffectual and dysfunctional for successful African Americans seeking entrée into the mainstream. If Whites refuse to accept Blacks as their equals except under the “burden of proof” provided by competence and achievement, then African Americans will continue to be faced with the prospects of affirming their equality in ways that are detrimental to the working class and poor.

To the extent that group solidarity remains an important goal for Black Americans, this exploratory study suggests that the repertoires successful African Americans use to combat racial stigma could have contradictory and dysfunctional effects. The challenge of promoting inclusive membership is one that should be met by every member of our society, but it is perhaps particularly acute for the members of the African American elite.

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## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered by the first author as a public lecture at the Institute for Advanced Study of Religion, Yale University, on May 3, 2001. Revisions benefited from comments from members of the Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University; the 2002–2003 Working Group on Identity and Difference, Center for Advanced Research in the Behavioral Sciences, the Department of Sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles; and the Department of African and African American Studies, Harvard University. We particularly thank Larry Bobo for his helpful suggestions. This project was facilitated by support from the “Successful Societies” program of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Studies, for which we are grateful.
2. I define “everyday antiracism” as the rhetoric and strategic resources deployed by individual members of stigmatized groups to rebut the notion of their inferiority in the course of their daily life. This notion is inspired by Essed’s (1990) notion of everyday racism. It also expands on Aptheker’s (1992) definition of antiracism as rhetoric aimed at disproving racial inferiority. For other studies of everyday antiracism, see Lamont et al., 2002 and Lamont and Molnár, 2001. Kindred studies include Mansbridge 1999 and Pollock 2004.
3. Drawing on David Goldberg (1993, p. 98), we define racism as a rhetoric aimed at promoting exclusion based on racial membership and produced by a dominant group against a dominated group.
4. We exclude from our analysis self-protective strategies to maintain positive self-views used by stigmatized groups (e.g., attributing negative evaluation to prejudice, comparing themselves only with ingroup members and devaluing domains in which the group does not fair well (Crocker and Major, 1989)).
5. For the purpose of this paper, we draw exclusively on post-hoc accounts of experience of racism, and of how respondents went about dealing with them, as opposed to observed responses to racism.
6. The work on the organizational and intellectual aspects of the struggle against racism as manifested in the abolitionist, Civil Rights, and Black Power movements includes Aptheker (1992) and McPherson (1975). Studies on contemporary antiracist organizations includes

- Omi (1993) and Lentin (2004). A voluminous literature has studied antiracism at the level of conflicts, i.e., by observing episodes where Blacks defy discrimination and mobilize against it. Although often not framed as research on antiracism, such studies point to the kinds of arguments Blacks use to denounce discrimination, disconfirm stereotypes, or show that they do not apply to them.
7. This question can be approached by examining the relative salience of material and symbolic evidence of equality that are offered by respondents, or the place of normative as opposed to positive evaluations they perform in the context of the interview. See Boltanski and Thévenot, 1987; Espeland and Stevens, 1998; Lamont 2000.
  8. Brubaker et al. (2004) offer an overview of cognitive approaches to ethnicity, within which our work can be located.
  9. Our study also draws on the work on stigma management among the handicapped and gay people. It complements the social psychological literature that focuses on “stigma consciousness” (Pinel 1999) and on how Blacks cope psychologically with the “perceived stressor” of racism (Clark et al., 1999). Finally, it also complements the work of social psychologists who have proposed the concept of group identity to refer to the extent to which people perceive themselves as being similar and linked in some ways to their group members (Gurin and Townsend, 1986), but have yet to put flesh on what defines group identity in the case of African Americans.
  10. Along these lines, recent surveys find that Blacks embrace religious commitments more than Whites (Smith and Seltzer, 1992, p. 30).
  11. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 4) describe differences in emphasis on Black and White worship by pointing to “the greater weight given [by Blacks] to the biblical view of the importance of human personality and human equality implicit in ‘children of God.’ The trauma of being officially defined by the U.S. Constitution as ‘three-fifths’ human and treated in terms of that understanding, the struggle of the African-American people to affirm and establish their humanity and their worth as persons has a long history.”
  12. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990, p. 4) suggest that Blacks consider their Christianity to be more Christian than that of Whites, because it is based on “the rock of antidiscrimination” and oriented toward the search for freedom.
  13. In pristine Christianity, “the divinity of each person makes evident not only his or her worth but makes it necessary to treat each human being as an end in himself or herself” (Patterson 1977, p. 226).
  14. Racist readings of the Bible were widely used to justify White racism by feeding the notion that Americans are chosen people especially favored by God (Smith 1997, p. 24).
  15. Robert Miles (1989, chapter 1) suggests that this account gained in popularity between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, after which it was superseded by scientific racism viewing the human species as divided into permanent and discrete groups.
  16. The use of “uncontestable” evidence grounded in naturally occurring phenomena is also frequent in the antiracist repertoires of North African immigrants living in France. See Lamont et al. (2002).
  17. Prospective respondents were first sent a letter (written on Princeton University stationery, where the first author taught at the time. This letter provided background information on the project and informed them that they would be contacted for an interview in the following weeks. The stated purpose of the interview was to gather information on what they perceive to be successful antiracist strategies for African Americans. Prospective respondents were also informed that their names had been obtained from the sociometric study conducted by Howard Taylor and his colleagues. Interviews were set up by a research assistant. The first author conducted the phone interviews, which lasted approximately an hour. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondents, and transcribed. While some respondents asked that we protect their anonymity, others authorized us to reveal their identity, which explains why some participants are identified by name while others are not. Interviews were coded thematically by the first author. She systematically looked for counter-evidence and used matrix displays (see Miles and Huberman, 1994) to reveal patterns in the use of antiracist arguments. For details, see Lamont (2000), Appendix A.
  18. This paper showed that marketing specialists believe that Blacks use consumption to signify and acquire equality, respect, acceptance, and status. They prioritize a market-driven notion of equality that equates social membership with high socioeconomic status. They believe Blacks display visible signals of high status (e.g., expensive clothes) in order to counteract racism, to distance themselves conspicuously from the “ghetto

- Black” stereotype, and, as one respondent put it, to disconfirm the view that Blacks are “uninteresting,” i.e., unlikely to bring benefits through networking.
19. For instance, Wilkins (2004) explores whether members of the African American elite, such as lawyers, can “do well by doing good.”

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