PATHS TO PRESTIGE: CONSUMER CULTURE AND THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

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**Contribution Statement**: This research has two primary contributions to literature on social identity, particularly ethno-racial identity, in consumer culture. First, it introduces boundary theory to serve as a corrective to an ontology pervasive in consumer acculturation accounts of ethno-racial identity that overemphasizes group commonality; taking for granted the bases for group connectedness and solidarity rather than directly assessing them. This research argues that understanding ethno-racial identity construction is predicated on understanding where and how identity-defining group boundaries are drawn. Second, this research uses data drawn from a sample of middle-class Blacks to problematize and add considerable nuance to accounts of ethno-racial identity construction in the consumption domain. Prior research claims that consumption is uniquely important to Black ethno-racial identity construction, particularly among the middle-class (e.g., Branchik and Davis 2009; Lamont and Molnar 2001). However, this research argues that consumption is more properly characterized as important to blackness in unique ways rather than uniquely important. Depending on their boundary-making strategies, middle-class Blacks may marginalize consumption rather than make it central. Or, they may highlight the importance of consumption that is distinctive from Whites, or the Black working-class and poor.

**Abstract**: This research excavates the consumption strategies of middle-class Blacks, investigating them through the lens of everyday consumption to better understand ethno-racial identity construction. The data is drawn on a purposive sample of middle-class Blacks living in the southeastern USA. Drawing on boundary theory, the findings reveal multiple strategies for ethno-racial identity construction at the interpersonal level. Informants draw identity-defining boundaries around essentialized notions of culture and networks of mutual obligation. Implications for the ontology of ethnicity and are discussed.
In 2004 renowned entertainer Bill Cosby addressed the national convention of the NAACP, the oldest and largest civil rights organization in the US (Cosby 2004). A celebrity comedian, actor, author, television producer, and philanthropist, Cosby has long engaged Black civil society as both a committed participant and staunch moral critic. At the convention Cosby delivered a lengthy jeremiad to the assembled delegates that centered on consumption, and by doing so engaged in a politics of consumption that has deep roots in US history (Lears 1994).

Paying particular attention to the culture of predominantly Black working-class and poor youth, Cosby famously inveighed against “sagging”. Already decades-old at the time of the speech, sagging involves wearing oversized pants or shorts well below the waistline, exposing at least the waistband of the underwear or shorts worn beneath. Like many fashion innovations, sagging has multiple origins stories that compete to be considered authentic, but most accounts associate the style with street crime and prison life. Sagging has diffused widely into youth popular culture, crossing ethno-racial and social class boundaries. Despite this, Cosby inveighed only against Black youth for wearing “their…pants down around the crack.” And, he reserved most of his ire for the NAACP’s Black middle-class leadership, asking them rhetorically, “Isn’t [sagging] a sign of something? Or, are you waiting for Jesus to pull his pants up?”

It is no doubt true that Cosby engaged in the kind of moral identity work highlighted in prior research (e.g., Luedicke, Thompson and Geisler 2010). He morally problematizes consumption associated with Black youth culture in the same ways environmentally-conscious consumers problematize driving a Hummer. However, he views consumption as an ethno-racial identity problem, not solely a moral one. He singles out Black youth—but not their imitators—

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1 Since this study is limited in its empirical scope to the United States, I use the standard ethno-racial nomenclature. “Black” is a broadly inclusive reference to people of African descent. It is conceptually inclusive of immigrants to the US from Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Empirically, the term primarily references African-Americans, born in the US. In this study it is not theoretically important to distinguish between African-Americans and other Blacks.
for engaging in consumption that is associated with criminal stigma. Further, and important for this study, he chastises the Black middle-class for failing to re-draw the boundaries of Black identity around different consumption behavior; for, in essence, waiting on Jesus to pull pants up.

Cosby draws heavily on racial uplift ideology to highlight where he believes the boundaries of Black identity should be drawn, and by whom. Racial uplift is a Victorian era ideology whose central tenet is that individual moral development is the key to collective racial progress (DuBois 1903b; Williams 2009). Steeped in the era’s elitist assumptions, racial uplift entrusts high-status Blacks with leadership in practically all areas of social and moral life, measuring collective racial progress by the relative status of elites. Eventually, racial uplift gave way to modernist and more egalitarian notions of collective racial progress (see Branchik and Davis 2009). Yet its presumption of elite leadership remains popular in contemporary Black political thought.

Cosby’s jeremiad, irrespective of its veracity, reminds us of consumption’s role in constructing social identity. It raises questions about the construction of ethno-racial and social class identity, and their resolution through consumption, at the interpersonal level that remain unresolved in contemporary consumer culture research.

**CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS OF ETHNO-RACIAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

Since the 1980s, acculturation theory remains the dominant explanatory framework in consumer research for understanding ethno-racial identity construction (Luedicke 2011). Its central premise is that migration to a new context inaugurates a process of acculturation, or
ongoing adaptation to an environment (Park 1950). With few exceptions, consumer acculturation research takes place in the context of global migration, or mass movement across regional or urban/rural borders. (See Izberk-Bilgin 2012 on ethno-religious identity for a recent exception.) Immigration is not a necessary condition for acculturation, however. Any inter-cultural contact can inaugurate the process, but as a practical matter, consumer acculturation research has made immigration the centripetal force around which all matters of race and ethnicity must orbit. Consequently, as Luedicke (2011, 17) notes in a wide-ranging review and critique of contemporary consumer acculturation research, current studies: “…[H]ave not yet sufficiently investigated how and to what extent consumer acculturation occurs within reflexive and mutually influential networks of socio-cultural adaptation.”

This research takes up the question of precisely how ethno-racial identity is behaviorally constructed within such networks, in the domain of consumption. To that end, it explores ethno-racial identity construction among the Black middle-class in the US. The core assumption in this research, consistent with a social constructionist perspective (Omi and Winant 1986), is that ethnicity and race have no inherent or fixed traits. Neither are they wholly reducible to some singular, more fundamental social category. Rather, at the interpersonal level, ethno-racial identity is constructed through social interactions and symbolic meanings embedded in overlapping and cross-cutting identity claims, all bound together in an unstable equilibrium (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Wimmer 2008).

To be clear, consumer acculturation research also adopts a social constructionist perspective (e.g., Askegaard, Arnould and Kjeldgaard 2005). But, owing much to its theoretical origins, consumer acculturation research has mostly attempted to understand identity among relative newcomers navigating new settings. Ethno-racial identity construction outside the
context of mass migration has been comparatively understudied. In response, this research identifies specific boundary-making strategies by which individuals, who are no longer immigrants in any meaningful sense, construct ethno-racial identity within the consumption domain.

**CONSUMER CULTURE & ETHNO-RACIAL IDENTITY AMONG THE BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS**

This research explores the relationship between consumer culture and ethno-racial identity construction, using the Black middle-class in the southeastern US as an empirical context. The context serves as a corrective to prior acculturation research that: (1) has generally not situated social identity construction into a broader socio-cultural framework, and (2) has limited its empirical focus almost exclusively to contexts involving mass migration. Although this research is similar in some critical respects to Ustuner and Holt’s (2007) research on poor Turkish migrants, the theoretical interest here is in social identity as it is constructed at the heart of consumer culture in the developed world. To that end, I explore ethno-racial identity construction among the middle-class segment of a low-status ethnic group in a highly developed country. I delimit my focus to the middle-class because their privileged social class position in a consumer culture presumably facilitates their social identity projects.

To clarify, I do not make claims about the distinctiveness of Black middle-class consumption relative to any other group. Nor do I make claims that mark some set of consumption behaviors or brand preferences as definitive of Black ethno-racial identity. Several scholars have noted that such claims, which index social identity to particular practices, are essentialist and gloss over considerable complexity (D’Avila 2012; Sunderland and Denny
A recent study, for example, claims that Blacks and Hispanics have a propensity for conspicuous consumption, using as evidence proportionately large expenditures on “visible status-signaling” items, like clothing, jewelry and automobiles (Charles, Hurst, and Roussanoy 2009). However, *a priori* assumptions about which objects visibly signal status (and which do not) beg the question of conspicuous consumption rather than investigate it. Research in the CCT tradition has established that any object embedded in a system of meaning can signal status; vegetables harvested at a community-supported farm as readily as clothing or jewelry. Thus the task of this research is to understand how object-focused practices construct identity.

The Black Middle-Class and Consumer Culture

A Black middle-class likely emerged in the US in recognizable if embryonic form during the Reconstruction period (1865-1877) following the US Civil War (DuBois 1999/c. 1935, Ownby 1999). I distinguish the postbellum Black middle-class from antebellum status groups rooted in racial paternalism. For antebellum Blacks, being free, a male skilled laborer, and/or having mixed racial parentage bestowed varying degrees of privilege within a strict racial hierarchy (Jenkins 1998; Blackwell 1991/1948; Douglass 1851). Privileged status extended directly from White largesse, or was subject to its whims (Myers 2011). Reconstruction inaugurated unprecedented opportunity for economic and social advancement for Blacks (DuBois 1999). Although much of that newfound opportunity accrued to the same privileged antebellum status groups, a small cadre of new entrepreneurs and elected officials, who were not entirely reliant on White *noblesse oblige*, joined the highest stratum of Blacks and advanced its status (Anderson 2000; Frazier 1997/1957). Concurrently, Reconstruction inaugurated an era of
increased access to consumer goods in the US. The expansion of roads and railroads during the period precipitated the spread of consumer culture (Richter 2005; Ownby 1999). By the 1870s, at the same historical moment that a Black middle-class is emerging, Chicago-based mail order catalogs from Sears, Roebuck & Co. and Montgomery Ward were bringing meaningful consumer choice to Americans in rural areas for the first time (Wilson 2005). The Black middle-class and consumer culture were not merely born at the same historical moment. They grew up together, overtly aware of each other’s existence.

In his archaeological study of an early Black middle-class residential enclave in postbellum Annapolis, Mullins (1999) notes that both Northern and Southern elites looked warily at the blurring of time-tested class and race boundaries that governed access to consumer goods. He quotes cultural observer Edward King (158), who laments that “a middle-class is gradually springing into existence, bridging the once impassable gulf between the ‘high up’ and the ‘low down’, and some of the more intelligent and respectable Negroes are taking rank in this class.” Elites like King found the possibility of a more fluid social class structure, absent a rigid racial hierarchy, especially daunting. In sharp contradistinction, Blacks (and many others) celebrated consumer culture’s promise to affirm and promote the expression of desire through materiality. Mullins (17) notes that Americans increasingly, “… vested profound sociopolitical hopes in consumer goods rather than religion, nationalism, labor or any other totalizing discourse, even at the height of the Depression.”

It is important, however, to temper such pronouncements with historical perspective. Despite the profound hope vested in consumer culture, historians commonly mark the period from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 through the Civil Rights Movement’s emergence by mid-twentieth century, as the nadir of race relations in the US (e.g., Foner 2011/1988; Franklin 1961;
Logan 1954). A rigid racial hierarchy, within an ostensibly fluid social class structure, was reinforced through violent anti-Black repression in northern and southern states (see Loewen 2005). But, nowhere was hierarchy more doggedly maintained than in the near-total segregation of Blacks from wealth-building opportunities made more widely available in an ostensibly more egalitarian consumers’ republic. During the nadir, Blacks were effectively prohibited from significant land ownership in the South. In the urban areas of the Northeast and Midwest they were excluded from access to capital for developing businesses or building homes, and frequently from wealth-building public policies like social security (Shapiro 2004; Massey and Denton 1993). With little chance to amass wealth, they had little material basis for intergenerational social mobility. Consequently, sociologists generally agree that no Black upper-class exists in the US, even well into the twenty-first century (cf., Graham 2000). This is despite the existence of a small stratum of rich elites that pre-dates the Civil War (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Shapiro 2004; DuBois 1899).

Cohen (2004) cogently argues that consumer culture, at its genesis and throughout its early development in the US, held in tension egalitarian and anti-egalitarian discourses about race, gender, and other social identity categories. Although it was billed as a new democracy of goods, it built on top of existing practices as much as it gave rise to new ones. Extant local and regional practices, including consumption practices, continue to give social identities like race, gender and class concrete meaning in everyday life. This research seeks to understand how.

Relevant Literature
In lieu of a more extensive review, I briefly address two studies that specifically explore a Black middle-class connection to consumer culture. I address other relevant literature as needed in subsequent sections of the paper.

Despite burgeoning, dynamic literatures on both the Black middle-class and consumer culture, scholars have rarely explored the intersection between the two in depth. Two notable exceptions are Branchik and Davis’ (2009) history of an elite Black consumer segment and Lamont and Molnar’s (2001) study of consumption and Black collective identity. The latter study is an early exploration of boundary theory, a matter to which I will return.

Although both studies inform this research, I depart from them in focus and breadth. Branchik and Davis (2009) chronicle marketplace activism, the primary strategy employed by Black elites (i.e., the Black middle-class and well-to-do) to establish their viability as a market segment. This research is also interested in Black middle-class consumers, but less in their viability as a market segment. Instead, it takes a Bourdieuan approach to understand how individuals use consumption to construct the boundaries of ethno-racial identity around their particular social class position. To return momentarily to the earlier Bill Cosby example, this study explores precisely how members of the Black middle-class might draw ethno-racial boundaries so that a consumption innovation like “sagging” sits inside or outside them. In that sense this research is closer in spirit to Lamont and Molnar (2001). That study explores consumption-oriented notions of blackness among a (purposive) sample of African-American marketing specialists who specialize in the Black consumer segment. The informants are situated in race, class, and institutional hierarchies in specific ways that make them sensitive to within-group and externally derived consumption-oriented notions of blackness. Lamont and Molnar’s purposive sample foregrounds theoretical constructs of interest, but does so at the expense of
rather sharply restricting the range of perspectives on consumption and ethno-racial identity. As a corrective, this study substantially broadens the theoretical focus and sampling frame.

**METHODOLOGY**

To explore and unpack the relationship between Black middle-class identity construction and consumer culture, I employ predominantly interview-based techniques (semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and other unrecorded conversations) with a sample of Black middle-class individuals and families. Recorded interviews with 20 total adults, including 12 family households and one focus group form the data corpus, which is also buttressed by numerous unrecorded conversations with other individuals over the multi-year data collection period. The focus group consists of four Black middle-class professional men who meet monthly as a semi-formal lunch group. As families and social groups are known to be key sites of consumer acculturation, collecting data from each informant in private was less important to this study than capturing conversations and interpersonal interactions within social networks.

**Sampling Frame**

All data collection occurred in the southeastern United States, primarily in medium-sized, semi-rural and rural communities. As such, this sampling frame broadens the empirical scope of sociological investigations of the Black middle-class in the US, most of which are set in large metropolitan areas in the Northeast and Midwest.
The relative absence of southern settings in acculturation research set in the US likely obscures important aspects of consumption’s role ethno-racial identity construction. Thompson and Tian (2008) make this point precisely with respect to whiteness in their study of commercial myth-making in the South. By mostly ignoring the South, prior research glosses over substantial regional variation in the way that actors’ ethnicity and race take institutional form. Racial stratification in the South has historically been less reliant on residential segregation than in the Northeast and Midwest (Massey and Denton 1993; Sugrue 1996). Black enclaves in the Northeast and Midwest feature stark and rigid boundaries that severely limit inter-cultural contact (e.g., Stamps and Stamps 2008; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). By contrast, the South has traditionally relied on a labyrinthine system of legalways and folkways, undergirded by interpersonal and collective violence, to regulate far more extensive inter-cultural contact (Davis and Gardner 2009/1941; Kruse 2005). Blacks and Whites in the South have historically lived in close proximity and continue to do so (Scommenga 2010).

Procedure

I recruited informants via personal and professional contacts, using the friend-of-a-friend approach to locate initial informants then snowballing to capture additional variance on relevant dimensions. Following Lacy (2007), I incorporate the small stratum of elite Blacks into the middle-class since they do not constitute a separate upper-class. I sample to capture variation between the most privileged and least privileged strata within the Black middle-class, which she labels the “elite” and the “core” respectively. Lacy has critiqued prior research for drastically
Thus, to be considered for entry into the sample, a person must self-identify as Black/African American and/or be coded as such in the US. Then, he or she could meet any of the following secondary criteria: (1) at least an undergraduate degree, (2) white-collar/managerial occupation, or (3) business ownership. These criteria, rather than an income screen, are more apt to generate a sample that varies across income but with high cultural capital. To wit, a majority of informants in this sample belong to the elite segment of the Black middle-class. Additionally, informants vary by marital status, stage of the family life cycle, and sexual orientation. They also range in age from their early 30s into their late 60s.

Finally, researchers must always account for their interactions with informants since both embody a myriad of socially-constructed identities through which experiences are interpreted and constrained. My status as a member of the Black middle-class likely facilitated entree with at least some, if not all informants. However, my status as an interloper, at the margins of various social networks, meant that some people would only speak with me conversationally without granting a formal interview. For those who did, interviews began with a grand tour of general consumption questions, including favorite objects, finding a home, family life, etc., using probes to elicit consumption and meaning about ethno-racial identity. I recorded each interview and the focus group, all of which ranged from 1-3 hours. The focus group, consisting of a set of professional Black men who meet regularly as a lunch group, allowed me to capture some gendered aspects of ethno-racial boundary-making. I conducted analysis in the part-to-whole fashion described in prior research, using Atlas.ti for coding and analysis. In subsequent sections

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2 Lacy (2007) notes that research on the Black middle-class generally over-samples high-income working-class and stable, lower middle-class Blacks relative to those in the small but elite stratum of terminal degree-holding professionals, well-to-do business owners, and those in other high-status, high-income occupations (e.g., entertainers, professional athletes). Lacy distinguishes this elite group from the larger “core” and assesses them separately.
of this paper I will introduce relevant theory, present findings from the data, a brief discussion and concluding remarks.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

I utilize sociological theory on boundary-making to illuminate certain aspects of ethno-racial identity formation via consumption. This marks a substantial departure from the dominant consumer acculturation model derived from the social-psychological research of John Berry (1997) and colleagues. Acculturation theory reproduces the ontology of 18th century philosopher Johann Herder, where ethnic groups, comprised of self-evident clusters of shared cultural traits, are assumed to be the building blocks of society (Wimmer 2009, 258). Many researchers note limitations of Berry’s original model, and have added considerable nuance. However, its ontology fundamentally limits insights into ethno-racial identity construction’s theoretically important interpersonal minutia as well as its macro-structural features.

Challenges to Acculturation

Consumer researchers have at times made substantial challenges to the dominant acculturation model, depending on their theoretical goals. I note here three such challenges that inform this research. Providing perhaps the most direct ontological challenge to acculturation, Thompson and Tambyah (1999) and Oswald (1999) make the initial move away from describing social identity outcomes onto highlighting the interpersonal discourses that form and constantly update identity. Ustuner and Holt (2007) broaden the theoretical scope of consumer acculturation
to include those too poor to meaningfully participate in Western consumer culture. They highlight macro-structural constraints that attenuate poor migrant women’s ability to enact consumer identity projects. Finally, Luedicke (2011) builds on earlier discursive approaches. He theorizes the process by which acculturation is constantly updated, with “locals” and “migrants” making cultural adaptations within particular macro-structural constraints (see Figure 2).

Boundary-Making Approaches

These challenges point to the importance of understanding how actors build boundaries that create identity in particular contexts. For such a research task, boundary-making approaches (boundary theory hereafter) are a theoretical advance over acculturation. Boundary theory explicitly highlights how social groups and categories are behaviorally constituted, given meaning, and even dissolved in interpersonal and inter-group interactions (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Rather than conceptualize ethno-racial identity as clusters of similar cultural stuff, boundary theory conceptualizes it as the messy outcome of myriad social processes. Those processes require explanation.

Messiness implies instability, a shift from ontological assumptions of stable in-group similarities (and out-group differences). Instability opens up the possibility that members of an ethno-racial group may not in fact share a common culture, common community, or common identity (Wimmer 2008, 2009). Networks of actors, who may be connected on any number of bases, and whose connections may or may not be mutually reinforced, build the boundaries that mark ethno-racial identity. Where and how is informed by their respective resources and their positions in hierarchies of power. So, sagging may be morally problematic for Bill Cosby, and thus well outside appropriate boundaries of blackness. However, it is well within its bounds for
Lamont and Molnar’s (2001) African American market segment specialists. Each is differently situated to affect how identity-defining boundaries are constructed.

*Boundary Theory: Operational Traits and Extensions.* Because social identities emerge at the intersections of a theoretically limitless number of boundaries, I note that some have greater capacity to sort actors into socially meaningful categories and groups than others. Boundaries with high discriminatory capacity are referred to as “bright” and those with low discriminatory capacity are referred to as “blurry”. A bright boundary (relatively) unambiguously locates an actor in a distinct, socially significant category and/or group (see review in Fox and Guglielmo 2012). Blurry boundaries allow for greater fluidity, where an actor can be in multiple categories or groups simultaneously.

Fox and Guglielmo identify two main operational traits that define the extent of a boundary’s brightness. A boundary is bright when it is: (1) recognized; that is, has attained general awareness and acceptance, even if challenged, and (2) institutionalized; that is, features networked actors who create and/or maintain it. The way a boundary is institutionalized in a domain is an important determinant of its brightness (Alba 2005). Ethno-racial boundaries may be institutionalized by prevailing directly on ethno-racial distinctions (e.g., segregated public facilities). Or, they may be institutionalized by prevailing on the correlates of race and ethnicity instead. An example from housing markets is the shift from overt racial discrimination to the widespread use of ostensibly colorblind zoning ordinances in the 1960s and 70s, exacerbating residential segregation in the Northeast and Midwest (Housing Center of Greater Boston c. 2012; Yinger 1997).

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3 Lamont and Molnar’s (2002) “social” and “symbolic” boundaries are roughly synonymous with “bright” and “blurry” boundaries, respectively.
Consumption is an interesting domain for boundary theory precisely because ethno-racial identity is likely at its most fluid in consumer culture, owing to the centrality of expressing meaning through materiality (Oswald 1999). Thus, to determine the extent of a boundary’s brightness in the consumption domain, it is necessary to broaden the scope of institutionalization. Historically, sociological research focuses on state-sanctioned actors, typically elites, who impose classification systems on others in a top-down manner. But, boundaries are also institutionalized from the bottom-up, and by non-elite actors. This is perhaps more clearly the case in the consumption domain than the political/legal domain. Market actors (e.g., firms, industry specialists, consumers, etc.), most of whom are not state-sanctioned, impact how ethno-racial boundaries are institutionalized through interpersonal and intergroup interactions.

To illustrate, consider the role of Cuban-American and Mexican-owned boutique advertising agencies in institutionalizing the Hispanic pan-ethnic identity in the US (D’Avila 2012). These small firms were the central figures in building a market segment around Spanish language heritage, broadly construed. They actively de-emphasized national and regional distinctions in order to make this eclectic, largely bi-coastal cluster of culturally diverse immigrant groups more attractive to large advertisers. At the time, these immigrant groups had little notion of shared identity. Only later did they come to see themselves in pan-ethnic (rather than national) terms, due in no small part to targeted communications efforts that presumed and reinforced pan-ethnicity. The state only recognized Hispanic pan-ethnicity as an official ethnic identity category in the US Census well after it was institutionalized as a market segment. The category has since undergone even more transformation (Glenn 2002; Lee and Bean 2010).

In addition to broadening the scope of institutionalization to include non-elite, non-state actors, I introduce a third operational trait to boundaries to account for the domain of
consumption. I argue that in the consumption domain a boundary is bright to the extent that it is practiced and/or ritualized. Practice and ritual are easily at the heart of each of the broad research programs that comprise CCT, including consumer identity projects (Arnould and Thompson 2005). They are a telling indicator of the boundary’s discriminatory power; when actors engage in routinized, object-focused behaviors they reify or challenge boundaries.

Taken together, bright and blurry boundaries overlap and cross cut, resulting in a variety of category- or group-based identities, each with varying levels of social significance. A boundary-created identity is socially significant if it impacts social closure, widens social distance, or resists being crossed. Social closure refers broadly to life chances, or ability to obtain needed material and symbolic resources. Social distance refers to perceived equality, or nearness. Boundary-crossing refers to the extent to which category or group identity can be changed, or multiple identities held simultaneously (Fox and Guglielmo 2012; Lamont and Molnar 2002).

Finally, boundaries are themselves dynamic. Actors change them substantially across time and space. They expand boundaries to include former outsiders or contract boundaries to expel some sub-group members. Theoretically, actors may also re-interpret what boundaries mean. They may also cross, brighten, or blur boundaries. Worth noting is that although boundaries are mutable, a given actor may not be equipped to alter them to her advantage even if she is highly motivated to do so. Boundary-making always occurs in particular institutions and networks, among actors with varying stores of power in the setting (Wimmer 2008). As such, boundaries are quite sensitive to localized interpersonal dynamics but not idiosyncratic. Boundaries that look and feel differently across settings or over time may have similar consequences. Moral invectives against the blues in one period become invectives against
sagging pants in another. Having expounded on the theoretical approach, I will next present findings from the data.

**FINDINGS: CONSTRUCTING ETHNO-RACIAL IDENTITY**

American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois (1903a) famously quipped that the problem of the 20th century would be the problem of the color line. The boundary separating Black and White identity in the US remains bright into the twenty-first century (Alba 2005; Shapiro 2004). This is despite the legal dismantling of the Jim Crow racial state, substantial declines in overtly anti-Black attitudes, modest declines in Black-White residential segregation, and the election of an African American President, all since the mid-twentieth century (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Rather than demonstrate the brightness of the boundary, as has been done in prior research (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Shapiro 2004), this research draws attention to consumption-oriented boundary strategies employed by the Black middle-class to configure and re-configure their ethno-racial identity. Informants in this sample generate insights into how the Black middle-class understands boundaries and manages them to construct ethno-racial identity. All perceive themselves to be members of the Black/African-American ethno-racial category as it exists in the US, and are perceived as such by others. They do not, however, take membership in this category for granted. Rather, they draw boundaries around and through blackness that at times compete with the color line for primacy. The consumption domain generates insights into their ethno-racial boundary-making that are not available in the legal/political domain.

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4 I note that the sample does not include persons who claim bi-racial or mixed race identity or have phenotype that might make ethno-racial classification ambiguous.
Boundary Topography Strategies

Following Wimmer’s (2008) typology of ethno-racial boundary-making strategies directly, I group boundary strategies into two very broad types. In the first type, actors seek to change boundary topography. That is, they expand boundaries to incorporate out-group members into an identity group. Or conversely, they contract boundaries to expel in-group members. In the second type, actors seek to change their affiliation with particular boundary-created identity groups or alter a boundary’s meaning. The advantages of utilizing Wimmer’s existing typology are that it is logically exhaustive and the boundary-making strategies available to actors within these two broad types are intuitive. However, Wimmer develops the typology exclusively in the domain of law and politics, highlighting the actions of elites, state-sanctioned actors, and movement actors. Moving the typology to the consumption domain is no trivial conversion.

Strategies designed to affect boundary topography (i.e., expansion/contraction) are generally unavailable to Blacks in the US, irrespective of their social class position. The logic of ancestral hypodescent (the so-called “one drop” rule) underlies the common sense of blackness and whiteness in the US. As such, claims of whiteness hinge on the absence of blackness (Roediger 2006; Harris 1993; Loewen 1988). The two identities are institutionalized as dichotomous and maximally distant, with blackness fixed in the low-status position. In the 1990s, individuals making multi-racial identity claims directly challenged hypodescent’s dichotomous logic. Multi-racial identity is now the fastest growing ethno-racial identity group (US Census 2012). Nevertheless, to date, the impact of this challenge on the common sense of blackness and whiteness remains unclear (King and Smith 2011).
Although hypodescent ensures that the Black-White boundary is bright, it is less relevant to other group boundaries. For instance, the boundary separating Mexican and White identity in the US has remained persistently blurry (Fox and Guglielmo 2012; Massey and Sanchez 2010). So, even though Mexicans and Mexican-Americans routinely experience racist and nativist bigotry in the US they have also simultaneously been considered White for certain purposes. They have been White for employment and contract enforcement (Roediger and Esch 2012), but not for citizenship, voting, jury duty, and marriage (Glenn 2002). They have also been White in some states but not others (Almaguer 1994). By contrast, Spanish-speaking Black immigrants from Latin-America are assiduously assigned Black racial identity (Lee and Bean 2010).

Historically, it has been difficult for Blacks to directly affect group size or affiliation. Consequently, the findings in this research are oriented around the second type of boundary-making strategy, where actors seek to alter their group affiliation primarily by changing the meanings associated with particular boundaries.

Transvaluation Strategies: Inverting the Racial Hierarchy & Equalization

Actors employ transvaluation strategies to alter meanings associated with ethno-racial boundaries. Such strategies are readily available to Blacks, particularly in the consumption domain.

*Inverting the Racial Hierarchy.* This involves changing one’s position along a boundary, relative to some actor, without altering the magnitude of the social distance between the two. Typically, actors at the bottom of a hierarchy seek to redraw ethno-racial boundaries around some trait that repositions them at the top. In this extended excerpt from an interview, Baxter, a
clinical member of the faculty at a land grant university set in a rural Southern town, talks about his collection of G.I. Joe action figures. Hassenfeld Brothers, Inc. (later Hasbro) released the original quartet of “action fighters”, 12-inch (30.48 cm) moveable replicas of the iconic World War II soldier, in 1964. Hasbro added a Black soldier the following year (Crews 2013).

**Baxter:** […] So I’ve got this collection [of] like 100 G.I. Joes that I take out usually once a year around Black History Month. I’ll take it to a school and do a program called “Toy Story” that explains the connection between G.I. Joe the action figure and the impact it had on the civil rights movement; because people don’t understand the history.

**I:** Say a little bit about that.

**Baxter:** Basically in ’65 they created G.I. Joe, and they created White G.I. Joe. He is modeled after the WWII soldier because that’s the most beloved soldier. Before G.I. Joe, there’s no such thing as an action figure. There’s a doll but there’s no “action figure”. In order to get primarily White males to buy into the concept that you buy this toy for your son they couldn’t call it a doll. So they created the term action figure. Two years later, they created the first Black G.I. Joe.

If you think about the turmoil the country’s in in the sixties, to create a figure that is a Black man as a positive representation—[it] looks exactly like the White one. It comes with everything the White one comes with, which includes guns. So you’re going to give kids a toy that’s a Black man with a gun when you’ve got the Black Panthers. You’ve got Malcolm X. You’ve got Dr. King. It was like ‘wow’, and they could buy them at the same stores. You’re going to put them in the same Sears Catalog, and teach people that Blacks were soldiers. Now you’ve got little White kids playing with Black soldiers, and you got little Black kids playing with them—and they’re together. Totally
groundbreaking, when you look at the opposite for Barbie. Barbie’s invented in 1958. You couldn’t buy—when do you think you could buy a Black Barbie? It was 1983 […] But to introduce that concept; to get people to buy into it—it’s sort of like TV now. If you want to have a new TV network, you generally come out with shows that target African Americans and Latinos, because we’re going to be loyal. We’re going to support it. So, yeah. Black males weren’t really into buying their sons these action figures, but Black folks didn’t have that many alternatives. When [the Black G.I. Joe was] introduced, they [snaps fingers]. People bought them.

I: So your argument is that there was a targeting here of minority—so, Black and Hispanic—consumers that was then taken mass [to the mass market]?

Baxter: Right, and it would help promote the concept of G.I. Joe as a whole, because again, if you look at trendsetting things in our country—you start talking about fashion and other trends (music)—they come out of communities of color. As soon as the Black kids are running around, everybody got a G.I. Joe and [was] having fun. Then the White kids start, “I got to have one of those,” which helped boost sales as well. They never made as many Black ones as they did White ones, but it really took [off] when at first the White G.I. Joes weren’t selling. Black families were looking for something for their kids to have, and this is the only positive representation we got? Yeah. My mother made sure I had one.

For Baxter, consumption is a domain where blackness is not a problem to be solved but a cultural resource for use (see hooks 1992). In his narrative, Hasbro’s initial attempt to alter strongly socialized gender norms (i.e., to get boys to play with dolls re-labeled “action fighters”) fell flat. Hasbro quickly responded by releasing an equivalent Black G.I. Joe, enlisting the aid of Black
consumers at a time when such appeals were still quite rare (Weems 1998). Hasbro’s perceived motives are central to Baxter’s re-telling. Hasbro appeals directly to Black cultural sensibilities, and in exchange Blacks lend the product credibility and coolness through their innovative consumption, in this instance a willingness to challenge gender norms. Their innovation diffuses to the mass market. Precisely because Hasbro appeals to Blacks in order to generate mass market acceptance—not just acceptance among Blacks—the implications of a Black G.I. Joe extend well beyond the marketplace. For Baxter, Hasbro’s release of an armed Black action figure during a period of intense racial turmoil is a profound challenge to the Black-White racial boundary. Hasbro utilizes blackness to lend the product mass market credibility, and through doing so invites the mass market to see Black soldiers as equally iconic members of the “greatest generation”.

To clarify, Baxter’s narrative does not reduce social distance on the Black-White boundary. Instead it reconfigures blackness around cultural traits that render it more advantageous than whiteness under particular conditions, thus inverting the traditional racial hierarchy. Baxter characterizes Blacks as cultural innovators or early adopters who remain loyal to firms that appeal to their sensibilities. This kind of strategic essentialism is common among commercial marketing firms that specialize in the African American segment, as they must convince sometimes skeptical brand managers that African Americans constitute a distinct segment or sub-segment worthy of their attention (Sunderland and Denny 2007). Strategic essentialism refers to the ways marginalized groups forge a collective identity by defining it around select traits thought to be advantageous (Spivak 2006/1987).

Baxter uses folk theory about gender, race, and culture to reposition blackness at the top of the racial hierarchy under specific marketplace conditions. His folk theory is premised on
widely shared understandings of gender socialization and historical marketplace disadvantage for Blacks. White boys do not play with dolls, but they may do so when Black boys lend the practice credibility. Blacks will lend credibility to firms’ marketing efforts if they appeal to Black cultural sensibilities in a direct and respectful manner (Branchik and Davis 2009). Of course, this narrative glosses over considerable complexity in the relationship between Black cultural innovations and the marketplace. The practices Baxter positions as being at the heart of blackness (innovations in fashion, music, and media use) are most often developed by working-class and poor Black youth at the margins of society; less so by the middle-class. In fact, marketers (and the mass market) typically presume such youth to be the most authentic carriers of Black cultural innovation. Highlighting select cultural traits as definitive, while glossing over within-group sources of variance, is the hallmark of essentializing.

Essentializing allows Baxter to position blackness as simultaneously disadvantaged overall in social life but possessed of traits that, at times, invert its usual place at bottom of the racial hierarchy. Baxter then seeks to institutionalize the inversion through lectures and displays of his G.I. Joe collection during Black History Month, a time when many institutions in the US foreground challenges to the nation’s Black-White boundary.

*Equalization.* Like inverting the racial hierarchy, equalization repositions identity in a hierarchy but actors seek to narrow or eliminate social distance rather than switch positions. In an interview, Dee, who holds an advanced degree and is a state level director of a large federal agency, talks about planning a 50th wedding anniversary party for her parents. She responds to my probing about the affair’s black-tie theme by telling me that she got the idea from a White colleague.
Dee: You know my parents worked hard all their lives. They never had anything. They raised their children. I would say we’re all successful. So, where did that taste [for black-tie affairs] come from? I see these other people doing it. I said, ‘I want that for my momma and daddy. I can do that. That’s why I work every day.’ You have to have a hunger for that which you have not had. You have to have a taste for reaching another plane. And, as Martin Luther King would say, ‘You gotta keep your eyes on the prize.’

So it’s that kind of thing.

By her admission, Dee’s parents had little interest in the black-tie theme. It took some mild arm-twisting to get her siblings’ collective blessing, and to get her elderly father (a lifelong farmer) into a tuxedo. For Dee, who earlier in the interview recounted incidents of perceived workplace discrimination, the marketplace narrows social distance in a fairly straightforward way. It affords her the opportunity to be equal to others by doing what they do. Dee conjoins notions of a democracy of goods, embedded in consumer culture’s origins, with the rhetoric of civil rights. For her, the ability to express desire through materiality is the substance at the heart of Civil Rights Era social and political gains. Dee considers herself a beneficiary of those gains and thus duty-bound to traverse the path to prestige, pursuing that which she has not had.

One might interpret Dee’s understanding of Civil Rights Movement gains as little more than crass materialism substituted for hard-won legal and political gains, and perhaps not without some justification. However, the union of consumer culture’s democracy of goods with the Black Freedom Struggle is a long-standing one that precedes the Civil Rights phase of that struggle (Glickman 2009; Mullins 1999). To wit, boycotts and other consumer movement tactics were all part of the Black body politic in the U.S. long before the famous Montgomery bus boycott instigated by Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Improvement Association in 1955 (Lawson 2011).
Moreover, the simple exercise of consumer choice has long been part of the Black Freedom Struggle in the US, though an often overlooked one (Ownby 1999). Consider the zoot suit craze among young Black and Hispanic “hep cats” in the 1940s and 50s. As historian Robin Kelley (1996) notes, the long jackets with broad shoulders, wide lapels, and baggy “Punjab” pants functioned in part as a flamboyant rejection of war-time rations on fabric as well as racial exclusion from war-time industry. As noted elsewhere, the Black middle-class, and Black material culture broadly, grew up alongside consumer culture in the US.

Repositioning Strategies: Boundary-crossing & Collective Repositioning

In repositioning strategies actors de-emphasize identity on one boundary (e.g., ethnicity) and emphasize it on an alternative boundary (e.g., social class) to re-orient the set of meanings associated with identity, without necessarily changing meaning itself. For the most part, consumer acculturation theory captures repositioning strategies well. In empirical contexts characterized by mass migration, actors cross an identity-defining geographic border, which repositions aspects of their original identities without entirely re-writing them. However, repositioning should be understood as one of several strategies for constructing ethno-racial identity rather than as an exclusive one. Repositioning should also be de-coupled from the mass migration context. As a practical matter, actors in a variety of contexts may prove unable to implement transvaluation strategies that directly alter the meanings associated with an ethno-racial group. Such meanings can be entrenched. Consequently, actors may opt to reposition themselves by emphasizing an altogether different identity-defining boundary.
Among these informants, I find that boundary-crossing is primarily an individual level strategy designed to reposition an individual or small network (e.g., family) in a status hierarchy. However, I also hear in informants’ narratives elements of collective repositioning aimed at the larger ethno-racial group. So, rather than draw a hard distinction between the two overlapping strategies I analyze them together.

Below is an excerpt from a focus group consisting of four male middle-class professional colleagues (and friends) who meet monthly as a semi-formal lunch group, known colloquially as “the Brothers”. They describe their own and their children’s attempts at repositioning in terms that suggest only qualified success, which belies their occupational and social status. The Brothers’ struggles to successfully implement boundary-crossing and collective repositioning strategies are not entirely unlike the shattered identity projects identified by Ustuner and Holt (2007), though in milder form.

**Male 4:** [My son and my daughter] were talking about who had it the toughest growing up between them. It just dawned on me the dynamics that were going on. You can just imagine yourself in an environment where you're trying to do the right thing. You're trying to do the work, but you're not accepted [as] White. It never dawned on me how tough it was. To me, that’s tougher than when I was growing up. You knew where you stood. […] It’s a tough environment when you try to do right, man; for us. Again, we the talented tenth and we struggling? [*sic; emphasis in original*]

Social class, race, culture and locale interact in ways that frustrate attempts at boundary-crossing in the setting. This conversation between Male 4’s young adult children, roughly one year apart in age, occurs in the family car on the trip to drop his son at college to begin his freshman year. He is attending a Historically Black University (HBCU) in the South. Despite his children’s
scholastic and other achievements, he characterizes their boundary-crossing attempts as only a qualified success because they cannot convert high cultural capital into status in the same ways or at the same rate as Whites. Their boundary-crossing attempts, which emphasize an education-focused achievement orientation, are easily stigmatized as “acting white” (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Ogbu 2003). Thus, their perceived social distance from Whites remains high, despite comparable stores of cultural capital. Previously cited research on the Black middle-class highlights the centrality of repositioning strategies to this group. Generally, boundary-crossers seek to draw identity boundaries around high-status generating cultural capital. However, acculturation is not entirely within their control. It is subject to a variety of macro-structural and interpersonal constraints.

The Brothers inhabit a different setting than those explored in previously cited studies on Black middle-class status attainment. Their lunch group meets in a cluster of small rural towns on the outskirts of mid-sized city. The towns are anchored by a large land grant university, the primary engine of the local economy. Each of these men migrated to the area to pursue professional opportunities. In recent years additional firms have located close by, bringing an influx of jobs that pay middle-class wages to a historically low-wage region of the state. Thus, all of these men reside at the outskirts of a vibrant metropolitan area economy (except Male 2, who lives closer to its center) in a region of the state with a small-but-growing middle-class. A tiny proportion of a small middle-class overall, the Black middle-class is quite literally a petit bourgeoisie. Consequently, these men’s local social networks feature few other middle-class Blacks. They must schedule time with one another.

The local institutionalization of race involves a cultural script that pairs blackness with low-status. These men believe the local cultural script to be almost universally internalized by
both Blacks and Whites, and it does not readily accommodate high-status Blacks. Thus, they respond with boundary-crossing attempts that try to overpower the stigmatized pairing of blackness and low-status with status attainment on the social class boundary. They self-consciously design a habitus in line with DuBois’ (1903b) notion that a small elite, a talented tenth, should direct Black social and moral life (one he eventually repudiates for a more egalitarian worldview). To wit, these men gave their lunch group quasi-institutional form in order to visibly challenge racial stigma in multiple ways. One of the founding members noted the following:

**Male 1:** After the [group] got started in ’92, [some] of us used to go to the [public] middle school… No agenda; we just went to the middle school to have lunch. Most of us had a coat and tie on. The kids weren’t accustomed to that. You could see the heads turning… All we wanted to do was just walk in there with a suit and tie on and show those kids that there’s something happening. We also… told [the school contact], “those black students that got in trouble that week; we wanted them sitting next to us.”

At the school they act as traditional role models, displaying to children their class-based status attainment, and displaying to administrators their social connection to at-risk Black children who are overwhelmingly from working class and poor homes. The Brothers also lunch at high-end restaurants throughout the metropolitan area, where they are commonly the only African-American patrons. At local restaurants they are more likely to engage in the kinds of status-signaling posited by Charles, et al. (2009). In these two instances they embody different high-status challenges to local racial stigma through their dress.

The critical point is that these are not undifferentiated bromides against stigma, whose meanings are context invariant. The boundary-crossing and collective repositioning I observe is a
response to the specific ways race is institutionalized in a setting where a Black middle-class is tiny and brief in tenure. Here, a group of Black men in professional dress is a challenge to a local cultural script in ways they may not be in well-established Black middle-class enclaves in places like Prince Georges County, suburban Atlanta, Brooklyn, or Chicago.

These men make the intent of their consumption dispositions and practices explicit. This is in direct contrast to literature that describes habitus as so diffuse that its status-generating purpose goes mostly unrecognized (Bourdieu 1977). Male 4’s “trying to do the right thing” is no diffused set of taste dispositions that feel just right or fit like a glove. The right thing, passed on intergenerationally in the textbook manner noted by Ustuner and Holt (2010), is constituted by dutiful adherence to the education-focused achievement orientation that defines Western middle-class orthodoxy. Unfortunately, the right thing is easily stigmatized in a local cultural script that does not easily associate high cultural capital dispositions with blackness. Much like the group of mostly African American boys in Jay McLeod’s (1997) ethnography of a Northeastern city, these informants’ boundary-crossing attempts do not fail them for want of cultural capital in any strict sense. Rather, the weight of the stigma, thoroughly ingrained into the local cultural ethos, reinforces the brightness of the Black-White boundary making it difficult for Blacks to effectively emphasize their positioning on other boundaries. Even ultra-orthodox adherence to the dispositions and practices of social class cannot entirely erase social distance along the Black-White boundary.

Blurring Strategies: Sub-ethnic Localism, Multi-ethnic Civilization and Universalism
Finally, blurring strategies attempt to allow actors to hold multiple identities simultaneously, or to substitute one identity for another. In that way they act differently than repositioning strategies, which seek to re-articulate position on one boundary in terms of another. Blurring strategies appear in very limited ways in this dataset, an outcome that is at least in part due to the brightness of the Black-White boundary in the US. Where ethno-racial boundaries are less bright, as some have argued is the case with non-Black minorities in the US, blurring strategies are likely to be more prominently featured (Fox and Guglielmo 2012).

*Sub-ethnic Localism.* Actors employing this strategy draw boundaries within ethno-racial identity groups to emphasize a sub-group identity that challenges an undifferentiated ethno-racial identity. Individuals might emphasize, for example, linguistic or regional variations in ethno-racial identity. Informants in this sample at times attach particular significance to Southern—or more precisely rural—heritage, de-emphasizing blackness and social class position. For example, Adam, a tenured professor at a public university, remarks: “My sister and I talk about... where we live; how it does remind us so much of the neighborhood and the country that I grew up in, and the same style houses.” In the interview, he is contrasting his and his sister’s taste, rooted in their simple rural upbringing in the core Black middle-class, with his other siblings’ tastes, which he characterizes as more cosmopolitan and materialistic.

Adam highlights the similarity between his childhood home and current home on their ruralness. His childhood neighborhood consisted of a cluster of new homes built in the 1960s and targeted at core middle-class Black families, the first such neighborhood with new housing stock in the county. Adam’s family was the very first to purchase, and he describes his older brothers carrying his mother around on the sold sign, “like she was Cleopatra.” Adam consciously sought to replicate aspects of that childhood experience as an adult. Interestingly, he emphasizes
ruralness over blackness in his housing search. By choosing a rural but predominantly White neighborhood, he partially blurs ethno-racial boundaries. Adam’s emphasis on the rural is striking when set against his home décor. An avid patron of the arts generally, and specifically Black art, his walls and tables are covered with Black-themed paintings and figurines—many by local artists. Ruralness for Adam is sub-ethnic. It accentuates rather than replaces ethno-racial identity.

*Multi-ethnic Civilization and Universalism.* Another way that actors can blur ethno-racial boundaries is by utilizing super-ethnic or pan-ethnic strategies that cut across or combine other identities. Two such strategies, multi-ethnic civilization and universalism differ more in degree than in kind. In both, actors draw boundaries around identity groups to emphasize a super-ethnic (or pan-ethnic) identity. In this sample, I primarily see evidence for multi-ethnic civilization rather than universalism.

Cynthia, an attorney for a prominent law firm, and former clerk for a federal judge, spoke of the value of frequently traveling internationally with her family as a child. Her initial trip to Liberia came as part of her father’s ministerial outreach to the war-ravaged West African nation. While there, she established sufficient ties to later establish an educational foundation in partnership with local civic leaders.

**Cynthia:** After I left, I kept in touch with [the co-founder] and others, many others, and … I said, “I got to do something. I want to do something to help. How do you all feel about me being [involved], honestly? Do you feel like victims? Or do you feel like, ‘please get away, we don’t need you?’” Well, they had not had African-Americans come to see them—only Whites—so they were extremely encouraged that we were there. They
had not seen it at all. I’m like, ‘what?’ I’m like, ‘Why is it that White people are more humanitarian than we are?’ What’s up with that? [...]  

**I:** Why do you think that is?

**Cynthia:** […] I don’t know. I’m careful [not] to judge. I’m not good about it. I don’t know. It saddens me, because I know that for whatever reason, and I hate to generalize, but according to the statistics there’s some truth to it.

At least to some degree, Cynthia’s *noblesse oblige* from a habitus that operates in a very traditional way. Unlike the earlier example involving the Brothers, she grew up in a in a larger metropolitan area with a longer-tenured Black middle-class. Both her father and grandfather were ministers, the occupation most strongly associated with Black middle-class status (Anderson 2000). Consistent with traditional notions of habitus, Cynthia received no explicit directive to “do the right thing” above and beyond her father’s missionary outreach. Yet she felt compelled to do so in a particular way, and expresses disbelief and disappointment that other African Americans are not so compelled. In truth, African Americans have an extensive and ongoing history of charitable giving and mutual aid in the US. Survey research indicates that on some income-neutral measures African Americans are more charitable than Whites, not less (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2012). However, African Americans, like most people in the US, associate philanthropy—and certainly international philanthropy—with well-to-do Whites (Hancock 2012). What is interesting here is that Cynthia’s early consumption experiences with travel enable the development of an expansive understanding of Black ethno-racial identity; one that incorporates the full African diaspora into a pan-ethnic identity. Pan Africanism has been a minor though significant basis for identity among African Americans. Its most prominent
proponents, like Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore, Marcus Garvey, and others, mostly came of age in Africa or in the Caribbean.

Universalism does not appear in this data, but in this strategy actors draw even more expansive super-ethnic boundaries, typically around moral (Lamont and Flemming 2005) or religious identity (Izberk-Bilgin 2012).

**DISCUSSION**

The strategies outlined in Wimmer’s (2008) typology, illustrated in the findings, demonstrate how members of the Black middle-class attempt to construct ethno-racial identity along a bright Black-White boundary. To the extent possible, they attempt to alter the meaning and status associated with their particular position at the intersection of social class and race in the US. Their strategies for doing so show us where—that is, around what phenomena—they draw the boundaries of ethno-racial identity. The data suggest that at the interpersonal level they draw boundaries around essentialized notions of culture and networks of mutual obligation. These constitute much of the semi-fluid substance of ethno-racial identity.

If, as social constructionist approaches would have it, ethno-racial identity has no inherent character then actors must infuse it with socio-cultural meaning. At times, members of the Black middle-class infuse blackness with essentialized notions of culture. At such times, consistent with acculturation accounts, they understand blackness as a cluster of cultural traits. However, narratives that characterize Blacks as culturally prone to be consumption innovators and early adopters of new products or fashions suggest that this understanding is strategic and thus subject to change. Such narratives are a part of strategies intended to lower social distance
or outright invert an existing racial hierarchy, often in pursuit of better, more responsive and respectful treatment by firms (Branchik and Davis 2009). Although narratives may hinge on cultural traits popularly ascribed to Blacks, informants understand those traits to be context specific rather than invariant. Blacks can deemphasize traits, perhaps even abandon them, when a given strategy fails or when circumstances change.

Of course, cultural traits can also be ignored or stigmatized by others. It is in this way that essentialized cultural traits can be problematic for the Black middle-class, and for understanding ethno-racial identity construction more broadly. When others assign a low-status stigma, or worse, when they criminalize traits presumed to be definitively Black, sources of variance that might otherwise privilege middle-class status can be glossed over or minimized for Blacks. Marketers appropriate the mythology of the criminal underworld and attach it to hooded sweatshirts in order to sell style to an eager mass market. But the criminal stigma associated with “hoodies” sticks almost exclusively to young Blacks and Hispanics, sometimes overwhelming other symbolic markers of high cultural capital.

Perhaps it should not surprise then, that these informants also display a network-based ontology of ethno-racial identity that is not reliant on essentialized notions of culture. In it, Black people share mutual obligation and a linked fate (Dawson 1995). One way the Black middle-class reinforces the boundaries of blackness around a network of mutual obligation is by supporting efforts to reproduce middle-class status. The Black middle-class is dedicated to constructing a local habitus that builds and sustains cultural capital. Like middle-class people of any ethnicity, these informants seek out and voraciously consume educational and enriching experiences for their own children and others in their networks. They expose children to high-status people in high-status roles and at times serve as role models themselves. They purchase
culturally-reaffirming books and toys. But in locales where the Black middle-class is small in number, briefly tenured, and easily stigmatized, their task is more difficult because the link between cultural capital and status is attenuated. The Black middle-class also reinforces the boundaries of blackness around particular notions of collective social and moral progress (often directly informed by racial uplift ideology). Employing what Jackson (2001) calls a race-inflected class critique, some, like Adam, critique family and friends for abandoning their Black rural heritage. Others critique Black middle-class leadership for doing too little to “pull pants up”, and by extension too little to stem moral decay in Black America.

Networks of mutual obligation take institutional form for the Black middle-class as churches, fraternities and sororities, educational institutions, etc. Many of these institutions, borne of rejection and isolation, but transformed into sites of mutual aid and fellowship, have maintained a hopeful if not always easy relationship with consumer culture precisely because it holds out the promise of a democracy of goods. Although it has not always delivered on that promise, consumption remains central to an ontology of blackness as networks of mutual obligation.

Despite rising intra-racial inequality, with increasingly distinct lived experiences for Blacks of different social classes, the Black working-class and poor remain part of the network of mutual obligation (Patillo 2005). Blacks remain connected across boundaries of social class through Black institutions (e.g., family, neighborhood, church, etc.), though that connection has been characterized as an “unstable equilibrium” (Patillo 2007). The data in this research shows that the nature and extent of inter-class obligation varies substantially across generational boundaries. These informants felt most obligated to Black working-class and poor children, thought to be more behaviorally malleable than adults. Following Cosby’s admonition to pull up
sagging pants, one of the Brothers required his daughter’s date to do so before leaving his house. Black middle-class adults’ obligations toward young people were commonly steeped in the sensibility of racial uplift and the language of norms and values. They go to great lengths to combat low-status stigma, either through directly intervening in young people’s behavior and/or modeling high-status behavior.

Overall, this research reaffirms a social constructionist approach. Ethno-racial identity is a vessel to be filled with meaning at the interpersonal level. Yet, rather than assume the meaning and substance of identity, this research assesses it by investigating the strategies actors use to build and reinforce, or to challenge, identity-defining boundaries.

CONCLUSION

As with all research, this has limitations in scope and execution that should be examined as both shortcomings and opportunities for further inquiry. This study delimits its focus to ethno-racial identity, at a particular social class position, constructed at the interpersonal level. Ethnicity and race, however, are constructed by identification, an interpersonal phenomenon that is quite fluid, as well as classification, which is macro-social and far less fluid (Saperstein and Penner 2012). Thus a solely interpersonal account of ethno-racial identity risks overstating identity’s fluidity. A more institutional account of ethno-racial identity construction would involve a stronger focus on classification, similar to Lamont and Molnar (2001) and Ustuner and Holt (2007).

Additionally, a national sample of informants across social classes and geographic regions would better highlight variation on those dimensions in ethno-racial identity
construction. This research limited the sampling frame to a single social class, and only approximates geographic variation by highlighting a neglected region of the US and comparing findings generated therein to existing knowledge from other regions. Limitations in time and budget precluded a more ambitious sampling frame. Both these limitations constitute high priorities for ongoing research in this area.

In closing, this research contributes to literature on ethno-racial identity by introducing boundary theory to serve as a corrective to research that assumes rather than assesses bases for ethno-racial identity. Understanding where and on what basis group boundaries are drawn is a critical pre-condition for understanding social identity itself. Boundary theory moves consumer research away from a largely inherited Herderian ontological tradition, and holds considerable promise for the study of ethnicity and race in the context of consumption. Additionally, this research problematizes and adds considerable nuance to accounts of ethno-racial identity construction in the consumption domain. Some have characterized consumption as distinctly or even uniquely important to Black ethno-racial identity construction, particularly among the middle-class (e.g., Branchik and Davis 2009; Lamont and Molnar 2001). Given the simultaneous historical development of the Black middle-class and consumer culture in the US, consumption is undoubtedly important. However, “whose consumption?” and “important for what purposes?” are questions that complicate any straightforward pronouncement about consumption’s unique importance to ethno-racial identity. With respect to blackness, consumption might be more properly characterized as important in unique ways rather than uniquely important. Depending on their boundary-making strategies, middle-class Blacks might find themselves advocating for less consumption rather than more, for different consumption or similar. They may also find that their stores of objectified and embodied cultural capital are less highly valued in the consumption
domain than in other domains. As condemnations of zoot suits and jazz in one era and sagging pants in another can attest, the middle-class is but one author of consumption-oriented ethno-racial boundaries.

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