
DISPATCHES

OPENING ARGUMENT

BLACK SUCCESS, WHITE BACKLASH

Black prosperity has provoked white resentment that can make life exhausting for people of color—and it has led to the undoing of policies that have nurtured Black advancement.

BY ELIJAH ANDERSON

For more than half a century, I have been studying the shifting relations between white and Black Americans. My first journal article, published in 1972, when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, was about Black political power in the industrial Midwest after the riots of the late 1960s. My own experience of race relations in America is even longer. I was born in the Mississippi Delta during World War II, in a cabin on what used to be a plantation, and then moved as a young boy to northern Indiana, where as a Black person in the early 1950s, I was constantly reminded of “my place,”

and of the penalties for overstepping it. Seeing the image of Emmett Till's dead body in *Jet* magazine in 1955 brought home vividly for my generation of Black kids that the consequences of failing to navigate carefully among white people could even be lethal.

For the past 16 years, I have been on the faculty of the sociology department at Yale, and in 2018 I was granted a Sterling Professorship, the highest academic rank the university bestows. I say this not to boast, but to illustrate that I have made my way from the bottom of American society to the top, from a sharecropper's cabin to the pinnacle of the ivory tower. One might think that, as a decorated professor at an Ivy League university, I would have escaped the various indignities that being Black in traditionally white spaces exposes you to. And to be sure, I enjoy many of the privileges my white professional-class peers do. But the Black ghetto—a destitute and fearsome place in the popular imagination, though in reality it is home to legions of decent, hardworking families—remains so powerful that it attaches to all Black Americans, no matter where and how they live. Regardless of their wealth or professional status or years of law-abiding bourgeois decency, Black people simply cannot escape what I call the “iconic ghetto.”

I know I haven't. Some years ago, I spent two weeks in Wellfleet, Massachusetts, a pleasant Cape Cod town full of upper-middle-class white vacationers and working-class white year-rounders. On my daily jog one morning, a white man in a pickup truck stopped in the middle of the

road, yelling and gesticulating. “Go home!” he shouted.

Who was this man? Did he assume, because of my Black skin, that I was from the ghetto? Is that where he wanted me to “go home” to?

This was not an isolated incident. When I jog through upscale white neighborhoods near my home in Connecticut, white people tense up—unless I wear my Yale or University of Pennsylvania sweatshirts. When my jogging outfit associates me with an Ivy League university, it identifies me as a certain kind of Black person: a less scary one who has passed inspection under the “white gaze.” Strangers with dark skin are suspect until they can prove their trustworthiness, which is hard to do in fleeting public interactions. For this reason, Black students attending universities near inner cities know to wear college apparel, in hopes of avoiding racial profiling by the police or others.

I once accidentally ran a small social experiment about this. When I joined the Yale faculty in 2007, I bought about 20 university baseball caps to give to the young people at my family reunion that year. Later, my nieces and nephews reported to me that wearing the Yale insignia had transformed their casual interactions with white strangers: White people would now approach them to engage in friendly small talk.

But sometimes these signifiers of professional status and educated-class propriety are not enough. This can be true even in the most rarefied spaces. When I was hired at Yale, the chair of the sociology department invited me for dinner at the Yale Club

of New York City. Clad in a blue blazer, I got to the club early and decided to go up to the fourth-floor library to read *The New York Times*. When the elevator arrived, a crush of people was waiting to get on it,

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so I entered and moved to the back to make room for others. Everyone except me was white.

As the car filled up, I politely asked a man of about 35, standing by the controls, to push the button for the library floor. He looked at me and—emboldened, I have to imagine, by drinks in the bar downstairs—said, “You can read?” The car fell silent. After a few tense moments, another man, seeking to defuse the tension, blurted, “I’ve never met a Yalie who couldn’t read.” All eyes turned to me. The car reached the fourth floor. I stepped off, held the door open, and turned back to the people in the elevator. “I’m not a Yalie,” I said. “I’m a new Yale professor.” And I

went into the library to read the paper.

I TELL THESE stories—and I’ve told them before—not to fault any particular institution (I’ve treasured my time at Yale), but to illustrate my personal experience of a recurring cultural phenomenon: Throughout American history, every moment of significant Black advancement has been met by a white backlash. After the Civil War, under the aegis of Reconstruction, Black people for a time became professionals and congressmen. But when federal troops left the former Confederate states in 1877, white politicians in the South tried to reconstitute slavery with the long rule of Jim Crow. Even the Black people who migrated north to escape this new servitude found themselves relegated to shantytowns on the edges of cities, precursors to the modern Black ghetto.

All of this reinforced what slavery had originally established: the Black body’s place at the bottom of the social order. This racist positioning became institutionalized in innumerable ways, and it persists today.

I want to emphasize that across the decades, many white Americans have encouraged racial equality, albeit sometimes under duress. In response to the riots of the 1960s, the federal government—led by the former segregationist Lyndon B. Johnson—passed far-reaching legislation that finally extended the full rights of citizenship to Black people, while targeting segregation. These legislative reforms—and, especially, affirmative action, which was implemented via LBJ’s executive order in

1965—combined with years of economic expansion to produce a long period of what I call “racial incorporation,” which substantially elevated the income of many Black people and brought them into previously white spaces. Yes, a lot of affirmative-action efforts stopped at mere tokenism. Even so, many of these “tokens” managed to succeed, and the result is the largest Black middle class in American history.

Over the past 50 years, according to a study by the Pew Research Center, the proportion of Black people who are low-income (less than \$52,000 a year for a household of three) has fallen seven points, from 48 to 41 percent. The proportion who are middle-income (\$52,000 to \$156,000 a year) has risen by one point, to 47 percent. The proportion who are high-income (more than \$156,000 a year) has risen the most dramatically, from 5 to 12 percent. Overall, Black poverty remains egregiously disproportionate to that of white and Asian Americans. But fewer Black Americans are poor than 50 years ago, and more than twice as many are rich. Substantial numbers now attend the best schools, pursue professions of their choosing, and occupy positions of power and prestige. Affirmative action worked.

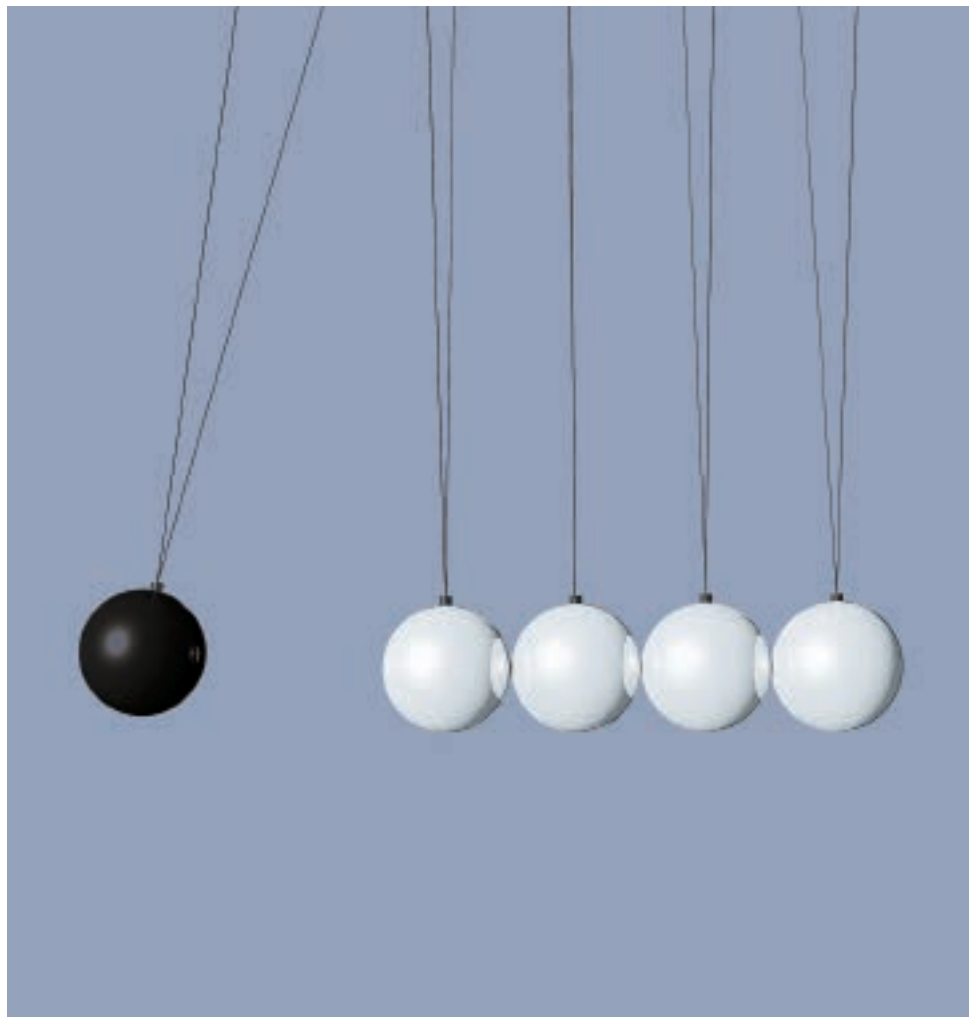
But that very success has inflamed the inevitable white backlash. Notably, the only racial group more likely to be low-income now than 50 years ago is whites—and the only group less likely to be low-income is Blacks.

For some white people displaced from their jobs by globalization and

deindustrialization, the successful Black person with a good job is the embodiment of what’s wrong with America. The spectacle of Black doctors, CEOs, and college professors

of interaction, in the guise of a casual watercooler conversation, the gist of which is a sort of interrogation: “Where did you come from?”; “How did you get here?”; and “Are

is required, a performance in which the worker must demonstrate their propriety, their distance from the ghetto. This can involve dressing more formally than the job requires,



“out of their place” creates an uncomfortable dissonance, which white people deal with by mentally relegating successful Black people to the ghetto. That Black man who drives a new Lexus and sends his children to private school—he must be a drug kingpin, right?

In predominantly white professional spaces, this racial anxiety appears in subtler ways. Black people are all too familiar with a particular kind

you qualified to be here?” (The presumptive answer to the last question is clearly no; Black skin, evoking for white people the iconic ghetto, confers an automatic deficit of credibility.)

Black newcomers must signal quickly and clearly that they belong. Sometimes this requires something as simple as showing a company ID that white people are not asked for. Other times, a more elaborate dance

speaking in a self-consciously educated way, and evincing a placid demeanor, especially in moments of disagreement.

As part of my ethnographic research, I once embedded in a major financial-services corporation in Philadelphia, where I spent six months observing and interviewing workers. One Black employee I spoke with, a senior vice president, said that people of color who wanted to climb the management ladder

must wear the right “uniform” and work hard to perform respectability. “They’re never going to envision you as being a white male,” he told me, “but if you can dress the same and look a certain way and drive a conservative car and whatever else, they’ll say, ‘This guy has a similar attitude, similar values [to we white people]. He’s a team player.’ If you don’t dress with the uniform, obviously you’re on the wrong team.”

This need to constantly perform respectability for white people is a psychological drain, leaving Black people spent and demoralized. They typically keep this demoralization hidden from their white co-workers because they feel that they need to show they are not whiners. Having to pay a “Black tax” as they move through white areas deepens this demoralization. This tax is levied on people of color in nice restaurants and other public places, or simply while driving, when the fear of a lethal encounter with the police must always be in mind. The existential danger this kind of encounter poses is what necessitates “The Talk” that Black parents—fearful every time their kids go out the door that they might not come back alive—give to their children. The psychological effects of all of this accumulate gradually, sapping the spirit and engendering cynicism.

Even the most exalted members of the Black elite must live in two worlds. They understand the white elite’s mores and values, and embody them to a substantial extent—but they typically remain keenly conscious of their Blackness. They socialize with both white and Black

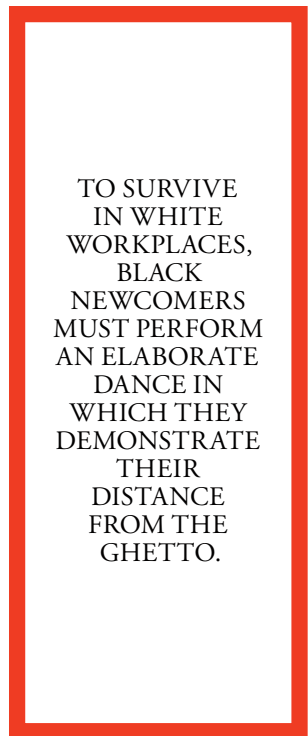
people of their own professional standing, but also members of the Black middle and working classes with whom they feel more kinship, meeting them at the barbershop, in church, or at gatherings of long-standing friendship groups. The two worlds seldom overlap. This calls to mind W. E. B. Du Bois’ “double consciousness”—a term he used for the first time in this publication, in 1897—referring to the dual cultural mindsets that successful African Americans must simultaneously inhabit.

For middle-class Black people, a certain fluidity—abetted by family connections—enables them to feel a connection with those at the lower reaches of society. But that connection comes with a risk of contagion; they fear that, meritocratic status notwithstanding, they may be dragged down by their association with the hood.

WHEN I WORKED at the University of Pennsylvania, some friends of mine and I mentored at-risk youth in West Philadelphia.

One of these kids, Kevin Robinson, who goes by KAYR (pronounced “K.R.”), grew up with six siblings in a single-parent household on public assistance. Two of his sisters got pregnant as teenagers, and for a while the whole family was homeless. But he did well in high school and was accepted to Bowdoin College, where he was one of five African Americans in a class of 440. He was then accepted to Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business, where he was one of 10 or so African Americans in an M.B.A. class of roughly 180. He got into

the analyst-training program at Goldman Sachs, where his cohort of 300 had five African Americans. And from there



he ended up at a hedge fund, where he was the lone Black employee.

What’s striking about Robinson’s accomplishments is not just the steepness of his rise or the scantness of Black peers as he climbed, but the extent of cultural assimilation he felt he needed to achieve in order to fit in. He trimmed his Afro. He did a pre-college program before starting Bowdoin, where he had sushi for the first time and learned how to play tennis and golf. “Let me look at how these people live; let me see how they operate,” he recalls saying to himself. He decided to start reading *The New Yorker* and *Time* magazine, as they did, and to watch *60 Minutes*. “I wanted people to see me more as their peer versus ... someone from the hood. I wanted

them to see me as, like, ‘Hey, look, he’s just another middle-class Black kid.’” When he was about to start at Goldman Sachs, a Latina woman who was mentoring him there told him not to wear a silver watch or prominent jewelry: “KAYR, go get a Timex with a black leather band. Keep it very simple ... Fit in.” My friends and I had given him similar advice earlier on.

All of this worked; he thrived professionally. Yet even as he occupied elite precincts of wealth and achievement, he was continually getting pulled back to support family in the ghetto, where he felt the need to code-switch, speaking and eating the ways his family did so as not to insult them.

The year he entered Bowdoin, one of his younger brothers was sent to prison for attempted murder, and a sister who had four children was shot in the face and died. Over the years he would pay for school supplies for his nieces and nephews, and for multiple family funerals—all while keeping his family background a secret from his professional colleagues. Even so, he would get subjected to the standard indignities—being asked to show ID when his white peers were not; enduring the (sometimes obliviously) racist comments from colleagues (“You don’t act like a regular Black”). He would report egregious offenses to HR but would usually just let things go, for fear that developing a reputation as a “race guy” would restrict his professional advancement.

Robinson’s is a remarkable success story. He is 40 now; he owns a property-management company and is a multi-millionaire. But his experience makes clear that no matter what

professional or financial heights you ascend to, if you are Black, you can never escape the iconic ghetto, and sometimes not even the actual one.

THE MOST EGREGIOUS intrusion of a Black person into white space was the election (and reelection) of Barack Obama as president. A Black man in the White House! For some white people, this was intolerable. Birthers, led by Donald Trump, said he was ineligible for the presidency, claiming falsely that he had been born in Kenya. The white backlash intensified; Republicans opposed Obama with more than the standard amount of partisan vigor. In 2013, at the beginning of Obama's second term, the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act, which had protected the franchise for 50 years. Encouraged by this opening, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas moved forward with voter-suppression laws, setting a course that other states are now following. And this year, the Supreme Court outlawed affirmative action in college admissions. I want to tell a story that illustrates the social gains this puts at risk.

Many years ago, when I was a professor at Penn, my father came to visit me. Walking around campus, we bumped into various colleagues and students of mine, most of them white, who greeted us warmly. He watched me interact with my secretary and other department administrators. Afterward, Dad and I went back to my house to drink beer and listen to Muddy Waters.

"So you're teaching at that white school?" he said.

"Yeah."

"You work with white people. And you teach white students."

"Yeah, but they actually come in all colors," I responded. I got his point, though.

"Well, let me ask you one thing," he said, frowning his brow.

"What's that, Dad?"

"Do they respect you?"

After thinking about his question a bit, I said, "Well, some do. And some don't. But you know, Dad, it is hard to tell which is which sometimes."

"Oh, I see," he said.

He didn't disbelieve me; it was just that what he'd witnessed on campus was at odds with his experience of the typical Black-white interaction, where the subordinate status of the Black person was automatically assumed by the white one. Growing up in the South, my dad understood that white people simply did not respect Black people. Observing the respectful treatment I received from my students and colleagues, my father had a hard time believing his own eyes. Could race relations have changed so much, so fast?

They had—in large part because of what affirmative action, and the general processes of racial incorporation and Black economic improvement, had wrought. In the 1960s, the only Black people at the financial-services firm I studied would have been janitors, night watchmen, elevator operators, or secretaries; 30 years later, affirmative action had helped populate the firm with Black executives. Each beneficiary of affirmative action, each member of the growing Black middle class, helped normalize the presence of Black people in professional

and other historically white spaces. All of this diminished, in some incremental way, the power of the symbolic ghetto to hold back people of color.

Too many people forget, however they knew it, what a profound cultural shift affirmative action effected. And they overlook affirmative action's crucial role in forestalling social unrest.

Some years ago, I was invited to the College of the Atlantic, a small school in Maine, to give the commencement address. As I stood at the sink in the men's room before the event, checking the mirror to make sure all my academic regalia was properly arrayed, an older white man came up to me and said, with no preamble, "What do you think of affirmative action?"

"I think it's a form of reparations," I said.

"Well, I think they need to be educated first," he said, and then walked out.

I was so provoked by this that I scrambled back to my hotel room and rewrote my speech. I'd already been planning to talk about the benefits of affirmative action, but I sharpened and expanded my case, explaining that it not only had lifted many Black people out of the ghetto, but had been a weapon in the Cold War, when unaligned countries and former colonies were trying to decide which superpower to follow. Back then, Democrats and some Republicans were united in believing that affirmative action, by demonstrating the country's commitment to racial justice and equality, helped project American greatness to the world.

Beyond that, I said to this almost entirely white audience, affirmative action had helped keep the racial unrest

of the '60s from flaring up again. When the kin—the mothers, fathers, cousins, nephews, sons, daughters, baby mamas, uncles, aunts—of ghetto residents secure middle-class livelihoods, those ghetto relatives hear about it. This gives the young people who live there a modicum of hope that they might do the same. Hope takes the edge off distress and desperation; it lessens the incentives for people to loot and burn. What opponents of affirmative action fail to understand is that without a ladder of upward mobility for Black Americans, and a general sense that justice will prevail, a powerful nurturer of social concord gets lost.

Yes, continuing to expand the Black professional and middle classes will lead to more instances of "the dance," and the loaded interrogations, and the other awkward moments and indignities that people of color experience in white spaces. But the greater the number of affluent, successful Black people in such places, the faster this awkwardness will diminish, and the less power the recurrent waves of white reaction will have to set people of color back. I would like to believe that future generations of Black Americans will someday find themselves as pleasantly surprised as my dad once was by the new levels of racial respect and equality they discover. *A*

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