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# 1

## Black Diversity in Historical Perspective

I don't want to uplift the Black race. I want to uplift people like me.

DARRYL, BLACK MULTIGENERATIONAL NATIVE

If they heard me talk, they would think I wasn't Black enough.

OLIVIA, SECOND-GENERATION NIGERIAN AND  
HAITIAN AMERICAN

WHEN WE SPOKE with Darryl and Olivia, they were both attending Ivy League universities. They had proverbially “made it”; their college degrees would solidify their status as part of the American elite and, more specifically, the Black American elite. Yet, each of them laments the complications associated with that status. Their sense of who they are as Black Americans is part and parcel of their lived experiences in families, neighborhoods, and schools and as distinct from one another as can be. The new Black elite is diverse, including multigenerational native Blacks and first- and second-generation immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean, monoracial and mixed-race Blacks, Blacks who are the first in their families to attend college, and those whose parents hold advanced degrees and high-status jobs. They represent the full complement of social-class status and skin tone, and they are disproportionately young women.

Until the early 1990s, social research on racial identity traditionally treated Black Americans as a monolith with little attention paid to intraracial differences (Benjamin 2005). The lingering assumption was that Blacks in America share a common legacy of persecution and subordination linked to African

enslavement and Jim Crow segregation. Blackness has long served as a “catchall” category for those who share dark skin and certain phenotypic traits. Psychologists, historians, and sociologists alike sought to understand how Black Americans collectively made sense of their position as a denigrated outgroup at the bottom of the U.S. social hierarchy, unified by generations of oppression. They focused on Blacks’ worldviews and ideologies as a reflection of their shared marginalization. For example, Drake and Cayton (1945:390) argued that “‘race consciousness’ is not the work of ‘agitators’ or ‘subversive influences’—it is forced upon Negroes by the very fact of their separate-subordinate status in American life.”

W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) was the first to articulate the duality of the Black experience after Emancipation with his concept of “double consciousness”—the idea that American Blacks are forced to recognize their denigrated social status while simultaneously acknowledging their own worth as human beings. Being a light-skinned man of mixed-racial and immigrant origins himself, Du Bois strove to promote racial uplift within his small, educated cadre of light-skinned, educated young men—which he labeled the Talented Tenth—and to encourage less fortunate Blacks to assimilate into upper-class White Victorian culture in order to elevate their position within the racial stratification system and challenge the color divide.<sup>1</sup>

Black identity in the United States has thus been largely analyzed as a linear construction, based on a simple either-or dichotomy that does not sufficiently capture or explain the multiple facets of what it means to be Black or recognize differences in the Black experience by gender, class, nativity, generation, or experience with segregation. Black achievement and success typically have been thought to require one-way assimilation and acculturation to White norms and values, and Blackness as a racial classification historically has been defined legally and socially by a “one-drop rule” under which any African ancestry limited one’s access to rights, resources, and freedom (Davis 2017). Indeed, in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court confirmed that any traceable amount of “Black blood” relegated one to an undifferentiated category of racial subordination.

Given these historical precedents, in the United States, Blackness has been constructed as a “master status” that subjected incumbents to exclusion and exploitation throughout U.S. society (Becker 1963; Hughes 1963). In the words of Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney in his 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, Black people are “considered as a subordinate and inferior class of beings who had been subjugated by the dominant race, and, whether emancipated or not, yet remained

subject to their authority, and had no rights or privileges but such as those who held the power and the government might choose to grant them.” To formalize the precepts of the one-drop rule articulated in the *Dred Scott* and *Plessey* decisions, in 1924 Virginia’s legislature passed a “Racial Integrity Act” stating that “the term ‘White person’ shall apply only to the person who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian” (Washington 2011; Jordan 2014).

In this context, variations in socioeconomic status, skin tone, immigrant origins, and racially mixed ancestry among Blacks became invisible to most White Americans, and in the wake of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, these differences were suppressed for a time within the Black community as well (Hochschild and Weaver 2007). Even though Black activists and scholars have periodically recognized the fact of intraracial diversity, structural racism has consistently limited the academic conversation in ways that explicitly and implicitly linked Blackness with poverty and deficiency and continued to presume a singularity of Black identity and experience (Morning 2011; Go 2018; Williams 2019).

In doing so, scholarship on the Black experience has largely overlooked the Black elite. Social scientists, politicians, and policymakers alike have long defined the parameters of Blackness as a homogeneously disadvantaged experience tied to blocked mobility within a racially stratified system (beginning with slavery) with Blacks unequivocally at the bottom and Whites at the top. This hyperfocus on interracial disparities flattens racial and social-class experiences and “frequently devolves into an either-or debate . . . the dilution of class into a cultural and behavioral category or a static index . . . that fails to capture power relations” (Reed and Chowkwanyun 2012:150). Similarly, a unidimensional focus on interracial disparities treats Blackness as a static identity that is not considered “embedded in multiple social relations” and thus “sidestep[s] careful dissection of how racism . . . [and] race have evolved and transformed” (Reed and Chowkwanyun 2012:151).

The ability to study intraracial diversity within the Black population in the United States, especially in the Black elite, has also been hampered by the absence of reliable statistics on Black nativity, ethnicity, national origin, and other dimensions of Black diversity. Until the 2000 census, most educational and national databases monolithically used “African American” or “Black” in reporting college attendance/graduation rates, neglecting national origin, ethnic identification, and/or intraracial distinctions (Spencer 2011).

Only within the last twenty years or so has the diverse composition and character of the Black population in the United States—and within the Black

elite in particular—began to receive the consideration it deserves as America's racial landscape was transformed by civil rights laws, affirmative action, return migration to the South, and immigration from abroad (Smith and Moore 2000, 2002; Haynie 2002; Rimer and Arenson 2004; Massey et al. 2007; Clerge 2019). In addition, rising Black social mobility and increasing rates of interracial marriage and cohabitation have led to a growing population of multiracial individuals. Today's Black college students come from many different places, with diverse phenotypes and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Although often overlooked, a notable body of qualitative and historical research has focused on the lived experiences of the traditional Black elite, namely the small cadre of multigenerational, native-born Black Americans whose light skin tone, education, relative affluence, and allegiance to “respectability politics” separated them from the rest of Black society (e.g., see Higginbotham 1993; Graham 1999; Moore 1999; Gatewood 2000; Benjamin 2005; Kilson 2014; Thompson and Suarez 2015; Landry 2018). These studies pointed out that the Black elite exists, has long existed, and continues to be an important part of the racial landscape of the United States. However, they tended to follow Du Bois who sought to emphasize Black diversity by focusing on class as the primary differentiator, leaving other dimensions of diversity understudied.

It was Black feminists who introduced the concept of intersectionality, using gender as a lens to argue that focusing on a single axis of inequality is a flawed oversimplification of how systems of racial oppression operate and how people understand their identities in a stratified social structure (see Crenshaw 1989; Collins and Bilge 2016). Yet, we still know relatively little about the origins and the lived experiences of the post-civil rights generation with respect to the other dimensions of diversity that shape access to opportunities and resources and differentially mold the construction of racial identities. Reid (1939) and Bryce-Laporte (1972), for example, argue that Black immigrants historically have been largely invisible in discussions about Black identity. Shaw-Taylor and Tuch (2007) point out that until quite recently, the history of Black immigration has been largely absent from the immigration literature. Clerge (2019) likewise shows how class, migration, and segregation combine to create both global and local understandings of race, color, and status.

Building on that work, here we provide a mixed-methods exploration of diversity within the twenty-first-century Black elite, emphasizing its multidimensionality with respect to racial identity, gender, immigration, skin tone, parentage, social class, and segregation. These are far from the only axes of differentiation, of course. Our data set lacks indicators of sexuality and sexual

identity, for example. Nonetheless, in the pages that follow, we hope to contribute to the literature on intraracial diversity by exploring the backgrounds and experiences of a key subset of young Black Americans as they enter adulthood and the nation's professional elite.

Who are the Black elite? What are their demographic and phenotypic characteristics? What do they share in common, and how do they differ? How do their diverse origins and foundational experiences affect their worldviews, including their thoughts on race and responsibility? By exploring these issues both quantitatively and qualitatively, across multiple axes of differentiation simultaneously, we not only reinforce prior findings about the dimensions of difference but also show how the process of entering into the Black elite shapes the way that the next generation of upwardly mobile young Blacks see themselves and their position in the nation's larger system of racial stratification.

The 2008 election of Barack Obama as president of the United States was a watershed moment in U.S. history, not only because he was the first visibly "Black" president but also because of his particular origins. The son of a White American mother and a Black African father who was raised in Hawaii by White grandparents and went on to earn prestigious university degrees, Obama's youthful optimism, Ivy League pedigree, and "nuanced rhetorical style" made him "Barack the New Black" for many Americans (Ford 2009). These qualities enabled him to appeal to a broad "coalition of college-students, hard-core progressives, and political independents" and raise "millions of dollars from small individual donations" (Ford 2009:39).

Obama thus personifies the heterogeneity of the new Black elite, and his presidency came at a critical moment in the evolution of the Black upper class. Four decades after the civil rights movement, many native-born descendants of enslaved people had experienced unprecedented gains in education, enabling them to enter prestigious universities, attain professional occupations, and earn high incomes. At the same time, immigration from Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America accelerated Black population growth (Waters 1999; Massey et al. 2007; Model 2011; Hamilton 2019) while rising rates of intermarriage created a growing mixed-race population (Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2007; Khanna 2011). By the turn of the century, the forces of socioeconomic mobility, immigration, and intermarriage together had generated a very heterogeneous, multihued Black elite (Herring, Keith, and Horton 2004; Charles, Torres, and Brunn 2008; Russell, Wilson, and Hall 2013).

Although the descendants of enslaved Africans, the children of immigrants, and the offspring of intermarried parents have all contributed to the great

diversity of the new Black elite, its otherwise heterogeneous members generally share one trait in common: the possession of a college degree, often from a very selective institution. Given that a college education is essential for advancement in today's globalized, knowledge-based economy, the college campus is now the crucible for elite class formation, no less for Blacks than other social groups. Here, we draw on a unique source of data to study the new Black elite in the process of formation at twenty-eight selective institutions of higher education between 1999 and 2003. In doing so, we seek to join others in redirecting scholarly attention away from its myopic preoccupation with the plight of poor Blacks and instead consider internal variation and status differentiation within the Black community, focusing in particular on the new elite emerging on college campuses at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

As we shall see, Black students at selective institutions of higher education are a very diverse lot, far more heterogeneous with respect to socioeconomic status than White students at the same institutions and much more diverse with respect to immigrant and mixed-race origins than the Black population generally (Massey et al. 2003). A light skin tone, a college education, and foreign origins have long been markers of status in the Black community, however. To set the stage for our analysis of Black diversity at selective colleges and universities, we offer a brief history of Black class stratification from the days of slavery up to the civil rights era of the 1960s.

### Black Class Stratification Before 1965

Since the days of slavery, light skin tone has given Blacks of racially mixed ancestry an edge over their dark-skinned peers despite the institutionalized construction of race as a master status in American society (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Turner 1995; Hunter 1998; Hill 2000; Herring, Keith, and Horton 2004; Wade, Romano, and Blue 2004; Eberhardt et al. 2006; Hochschild and Weaver 2007). Although "polite" southern Whites typically turned a blind eye to sexual unions between slave owners and enslaved women, they were nonetheless quite common in the antebellum period and produced a cadre of light-skinned offspring who were often granted favored positions on slaveholding estates (Woodward 1981).

Children of interracial unions and their descendants typically provided personal service to the master's family, a relatively privileged status that granted them sustained exposure to elite White culture and society (Gordon-Reed 2008). Given their "acceptable" appearance and the fact that many were

the master's own children, these slaves were among the first Black Americans to receive any kind of systematic instruction (Du Bois 1903). They frequently had the opportunity to train as apprentices in various fields under the auspices of their owners, who saw them as "good Negroes" in which investment was worthwhile. At a time when any type of formal education or training was outlawed for the enslaved, "house slaves" thus had a privileged status over that of field slaves (Hill 2000).

Many of them strove to emulate the behavior, speech, and decorum of their masters in order to gain favor, and at times they looked down on their darker counterparts employed elsewhere on the estate who did not enjoy these benefits. Because of their White ancestry, they typically gained their freedom before other enslaved people; their descendants were able to obtain higher paying positions within the White community such as lawyer, doctor, business owner, barber, caterer, and domestic servant (Bullock 1967:1–36). Their visible White ancestry gave them better standing relative to other Blacks, and over the generations, this initial advantage translated into greater access to human and social capital, what Hill (2000) calls "the social origins explanation" for light-skinned privilege.

Free Blacks in the antebellum period were also mostly light-skinned and lived in cities where they also had an elevated status. More than 80 percent of free Blacks in Louisiana were classified as mixed race in 1850, and nationally, a third of free Blacks were classified as "mulatto" in that year's U.S. census, compared with just one out of ten enslaved people (Landry 1987:24). They had relatively close relationships with Whites of similar socioeconomic standing, thus distancing themselves socially from the poor and illiterate Black masses (Moore 1999).

The situation for the small share of Blacks living in the antebellum North was quite different. Above the Mason-Dixon line, the system of slavery was not as entrenched and upwardly mobile Blacks were often able to work and live alongside Whites. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, there were around sixty thousand free Black Americans, most of whom lived in the North, a number that rose to nearly five hundred thousand by 1860 (Pifer 1973:8). During the early nineteenth century, the northern Black elite commonly interacted with similarly stationed Whites, and their children frequently attended integrated schools and played together with White children (Massey and Denton 1993). A fervent abolitionist movement in the North created space for integrationist sentiments, especially in cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.

During Reconstruction from 1865 to 1876, elite Blacks in the North continued to build status by sending their children to leading public and private secondary schools where they would receive a first-rate education to prepare them for the rigors of a predominately White college. A college education was understood to “both promote the upward mobility of those outside the aristocracy of color and enhance the position of those inside it” (Gatewood 2000:273). Nonetheless, fewer than twenty-five hundred Black Americans ever graduated from college between 1826 and 1900. Those who did graduate were held in high esteem and were expected to “represent the race” by taking leadership positions within society. Upper-class Blacks recognized that a high-caliber education was imperative for sustaining their own high status and ensuring the future successes of their children.

In the decades immediately following Emancipation, more than 90 percent of Black Americans remained in the South, where the caste lines of race remained rigid even during Reconstruction. Members of the southern Black intelligentsia were forced to send their children to private schools in the North or to one of the handful of segregated schools that catered specifically to the southern Black elite. The Avery Normal Institute in Charleston, South Carolina and the Beach Institute in Savannah, Georgia were among the first finishing schools for the children of prominent southern Blacks who could afford the monthly tuition.

Led by upper-class members of the old free Black population and backed by the financial support of White philanthropists, the Freedmen’s Bureau and the American Missionary Association provided students with both academic and industrial training. Black students learned farming, sewing, and home economics, along with history, government, and philosophy as well as African American history. Lessons focused on the leadership of prominent Black Americans who had succeeded in various endeavors despite slavery and segregation and thereby served as models to “uplift the race.” Unfortunately, legal segregation and sharecropping replaced slavery as the principle mechanisms of racial exploitation in the South after Reconstruction ended in 1877 and the options for Black students quickly narrowed. In 1875, the Beach Institute, originally founded by the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1867, was turned over to the Savannah Board of Education where it became just another underfunded and segregated public school, finally closing its doors in 1919. By the 1880s, the Avery Institute was the only college preparatory school for Charleston’s large Black population (Drago 1990; Gatewood 2000).

After the demise of Reconstruction, opportunities for elite secondary education moved northward to Washington, DC, where Republican politicians

continued to grant the freedmen and their descendants patronage employment within certain sectors of the federal government. At the center of elite secondary education in the North was the M Street High School in Washington, DC, later renamed Dunbar High School in 1915. Originally chartered in 1870 in the basement of the 15th Street Presbyterian Church by William Syphax, a trustee of the Colored Schools of Washington, DC, the school became the principal training ground for the Washington Black elite during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Syphax, who was himself a descendant of a “distinguished line” of plantation aristocrats, recognized the importance of a classical education in preparing Black students for the nation’s elite colleges and universities (Preston 1935:448).

Most Black faculty members at Dunbar had advanced degrees from Ivy League schools but were unable to obtain faculty positions at White colleges and universities. In 1873, Richard T. Greener, Harvard’s first Black American graduate, became the school principal and established a curriculum that trained generations of future Black academics who would eventually teach at Black institutions of higher education (Graham 1999:61; Gatewood 2000:267–272). Other privileged Black parents in the South sent their children to parochial schools that were connected to Black churches in Memphis, Louisville, and Charleston. These schools provided the Black aristocracy with a much better education than that offered by public schools founded by freedmen. The teaching staff at these private Black schools consisted of well-educated Black Americans as well as northern missionary Whites who recognized this “better class of Negroes” as future Black leaders (Du Bois 1903:130).

Despite the surge in school creation and educational advancement during Reconstruction, as Whites consolidated the Jim Crow system of legal segregation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, opportunities for Black students to receive a college education withered. Prior to the 1960s, never more than 5 percent of adult Black Americans ever held a college degree. Those who did manage to graduate from college became members of a privileged Black intelligentsia, since “access to a college education was clearly the earliest and surest method for earning respect among progressive Whites who were willing to teach Blacks various trades and offer them limited work” (Graham 1999:8).

With access to education at White colleges and universities blocked, most Black Americans before the 1960s attended historically Black institutions such as Fisk University, Howard University, Morehouse College, Spelman College, or the Tuskegee Institute (Du Bois 1903; Lovett 2011). By the end of the

nineteenth century, the nation hosted seventy-six Black colleges and universities (the earliest founded in 1837) as well as several Black dental, medical, and law schools. Often founded by northern White religious societies during Reconstruction, these institutions recruited the “best and the brightest” of Black America to produce successive cohorts of Black lawyers, doctors, businessmen, dentists, professors, and teachers who worked in and on behalf of the Black community (Lovett 2011).

Until the civil rights era, Black college graduates were demarcated from other Black Americans not only by their years of schooling but also by their light skin tone, immigrant origins, and multigenerational access to social and human capital (Myrdal 1944; Drake and Cayton 1945; Frazier 1957; Landry 1987, 2018; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Cole and Omari 2003). They comprised a small but formidable group of people who set the stage for political mobilization during the civil rights era (see Landry 1987, 2018; McAdam 1982; Gatewood 2000). Du Bois (1903) famously labeled them the Talented Tenth, describing them as a cadre of “educated mulattoes” and “college-bred Negroes” who could lead the Black race forward to progress (Kilson 2014). Du Bois was himself a member of the northern Black elite. Born into privilege in Massachusetts of White and West Indian ancestry, he was well versed in the culture and mores of upper-class White society. He attended an elite boarding school and earned degrees at both Fisk and Harvard Universities (Lewis 1995).

Du Bois argued that a classic liberal arts education similar to that received by Whites was required to ensure that the “best of this race” would be prepared to spearhead the cause of racial advancement and eventually eradicate White prejudice and segregation. A college education, Du Bois (1903:63) believed, was vital to developing a moral and professional class able to “leaven the lump to inspire the masses” and “raise the Talented Tenth to leadership.” A degree from a Black institution such as Howard, Spelman, or Morehouse not only presaged a professional occupation and respectable marriage partner but also carried with it responsibilities for social activism and political leadership. Historical evidence reveals that what Gatewood (2000) labeled an aristocracy of color was part of a dynastic assemblage of affluent mixed-race and immigrant-origin families who experienced a “cross-generational transmission of bourgeois status” as a result of a significant “color-caste dynamic” (Kilson 2014:25–26; see also Du Bois 1903; Kronus 1971).

In other words, prior to the civil rights era, the Black elite developed a “parallel social structure” based on skin color, education, and generations of inherited social status that set them apart from other Black Americans

(Gatewood 2000:4). Until World War I, this small elite group held professional and entrepreneurial occupations and interacted regularly with both a White and Black clientele (Massey and Denton 1993). In this sense, they “straddled the separate Black and White urban worlds . . . until the World War I Era and the beginning of the Great Migration” (Brown 2013:73; see also Myrdal 1944; Drake and Cayton 1945; Frazier 1957).

Although English-speaking Black West Indian immigrants have been a presence in the United States since the 1700s (Johnson 2000; Shaw-Taylor and Tuch 2007), their contribution to elite class formation in Black America has historically been overlooked by scholars and the public alike. According to Bryce-Laporte (1972:31, original emphases), “While black foreigners (and their progenies) have held a disproportionately high number of leadership and successful positions and have exercised significant influence in black life in this country, their cultural impact as *foreigners* has been ignored or has merely been given lip service in the larger spheres of American life. On the national level, they suffer double invisibility, in fact—as *blacks and as black foreigners*.”

Immigration from the West Indies surged during the first decades of the twentieth century, and by 1932, foreign-born Blacks comprised about 4 percent of the Black elite, though only 1 percent of the total Black American population (Reid 1939). Seventy-three percent of all Black immigrants living in the United States were from the West Indies, totaling approximately one hundred and thirty thousand persons (Reid 1939). Black immigration from the Caribbean was highly selective in terms of education, motivation, and aspirations, and most of the new arrivals came from societies in which Blacks were dominant and where race was more of a fluid construct than a caste-like categorization. As a result, the offspring of Black immigrants generally did better educationally and achieved greater upward mobility than native-born Blacks (Reid 1939).

Immigrants coming from British colonies such as Jamaica, Bermuda, and Barbados often earned professional degrees at America’s Black colleges and universities, and by 1927, they had established a Caribbean Club at Howard University (Logan 1958). In addition to Du Bois, other well-known Black figures of Caribbean origins include the actor Sidney Poitier, musician Harry Belafonte, Harlem Renaissance writer James Weldon Johnson, congresswoman Shirley Chisolm, Black activist Malcom X, army general and diplomat Colin Powell, Black Power leader Kwame Ture (née Stokely Carmichael), and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, just to name a few.

In sum, the descendants of mixed-race enslaved persons, free people of color, and West Indian immigrants dominated the Black aristocracy during the

first half of the twentieth century. Their light skin tones, college educations, immigrant origins, and knowledge of White culture set them apart from the mass of Black Americans prior to the civil rights era. Access to education, often through paternalistic relationships with upper-class Whites, along with a shared recognition of the economic and racial barriers faced by all Blacks, was integral to the development of a cohesive Black elite class.

The Great Migration of the twentieth century transformed the Black elite by creating large urban Black communities outside the South that supported a growing middle class of merchants, professionals, and intellectuals (Kennedy 1968; Marks 1989; Lemann 1991; Wilkerson 2010). However, mass immigration from the rural South hardened the residential color line in cities throughout the North (Lieberson 1980; Massey and Denton 1993). No longer welcome to participate in White society, privileged light-skinned northern Blacks were increasingly relegated to serving the Black community and developing themselves within the confines of the nation's emerging Black urban ghettos. In combination with *de jure* segregation under Jim Crow in the South, *de facto* segregation in the North created a rigid racial caste system that limited options for members of the Black elite in White society (Warner 1936; Dollard 1937; Myrdal 1944; Drake and Cayton 1945). It was during this time that the old Black elite lost its privileged status as broker between Whites and the larger Black community (Washington 2011).

### Origins of the New Black Elite

Until the middle of the twentieth century, life chances for Black Americans in U.S. society were circumscribed by Jim Crow segregation in the South, *de facto* segregation in the North, and institutionalized discrimination and exclusion throughout the nation (Massey and Denton 1993; Katznelson 2005; Massey 2007; Rothstein 2017). The situation began to change after World War II, however, with a civil rights movement that began slowly at first but then gathered momentum through the 1950s and 1960s to crest in the 1970s. In 1948, President Harry Truman desegregated the U.S. military, and in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court eliminated the constitutional foundations for Jim Crow segregation in the South in its *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision, setting the stage for a civil rights revolution (Williams 1987; Branch 1988, 1998, 2006).

The pace of racial change accelerated during the 1960s, beginning with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which outlawed racial discrimination in

labor markets, hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and services. The legislation also provided additional resources to promote school desegregation. The 1965 Voting Rights Act prohibited states from restricting the right of African Americans to vote and authorized federal authorities to enforce Black suffrage in states characterized by a history of voter suppression. The 1968 Fair Housing Act banned discrimination in the rental and sale of housing, and beginning in 1969 (Massey and Denton 1993), affirmative action policies were implemented in an effort to expand Black access to jobs and education through the use of racially focused targets and recruitment efforts (Skrentny 1996).

During the 1970s, the attention of civil rights leaders turned to discrimination in lending markets. In 1974, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act was passed to prohibit racial discrimination in mortgage lending and other credit markets, and it was followed in 1975 by the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, which compelled banks to compile data on the race of loan applicants for enforcement purposes. Finally, in 1977, Congress passed the Community Reinvestment Act to end the practice of redlining by which federal housing authorities, banks, and other lending institutions had color-coded predominantly Black neighborhoods red to deny residents access to capital and credit, whatever their race. By the end of the 1970s, racial discrimination had been officially outlawed in virtually all U.S. markets.

The civil rights legislation passed between 1964 and 1977 greatly expanded opportunities for aspiring African Americans in education and employment and led to a surge of growth in the Black middle and upper classes. Figure 1.1 draws on data from the decennial U.S. census and the American Community Survey to plot the percentage of Black men and women aged twenty-five or more who held a college degree from 1940 through 2019. As already noted, this percentage did not exceed 5 percent for either gender until after the civil rights era. From 1940 to 1970, the percentage of Black Americans holding a college degree rose very slowly, going from 1.4 percent to 4.2 percent with little difference between Black men and women.

After 1970, however, the percentage of college graduates rose rapidly, doubling to 8.4 percent in 1980, again with little difference by gender. Thereafter, the increase accelerated further for Black women, with the share holding at least an associate's degree reaching 19.8 percent in 1990. In contrast, the trend for Black men did not accelerate and the share of college educated among them stood only at 11.9 percent in 1990, opening up a large gender gap. Growth in the share of college-educated Black women flattened during the 1990s, rising to just 20.1 percent in 2000 while the share of college-educated Black men increased

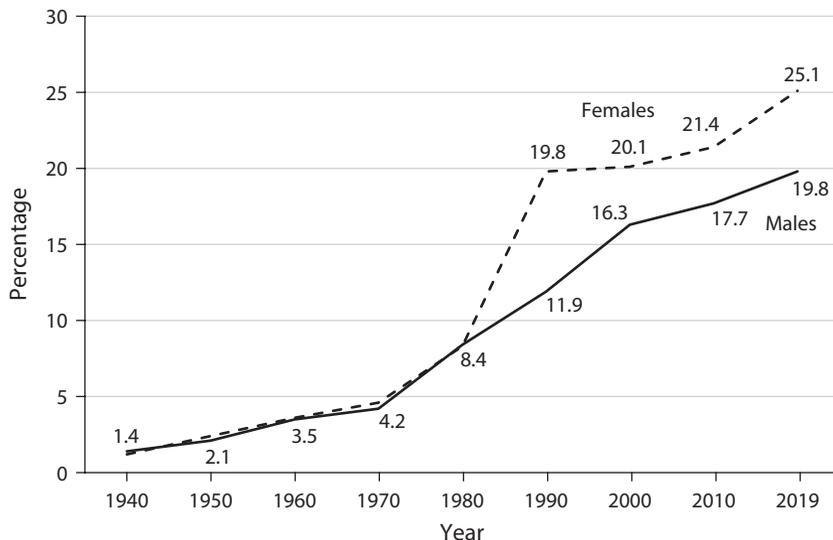


FIGURE 1.1. Percent college educated among Black Americans  
Sources: U.S. Census (1850–2010) and American Community Survey (2019)  
(Ruggles, Flood, et al. 2021)

and reached 16.3 percent in 2000, thus narrowing the gender gap at the turn of the twenty-first century.

After 2000, however, the increase in the share of college-educated Black men slowed substantially and reached just 19.8 percent in 2019, whereas the upward trajectory resumed for Black women and accelerated after 2010 to propel their share of college graduates to a record high of 25.1 percent in 2019, once again widening the gender gap for college completion. As a class, therefore, the population of college-educated Black Americans has come to be characterized by a very imbalanced sex ratio in which there are 139 college-educated Black women for every 100 college-educated Black men, according to data from the 2019 American Community Survey (Ruggles, Flood, et al. 2021). Among Black college students who were enrolled in U.S. degree-granting institutions in 2019, there were 141 Black women for every 100 Black men (U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics 2020a). The sex ratio is even more skewed at selective institutions. Among Black students attending twenty-eight selective colleges surveyed in 1999 by Massey et al. (2003), there were two hundred Black women for every one hundred Black men on campus.

Although Black incomes continue to lag well behind White incomes, the increasing share of African Americans holding college degrees has led to

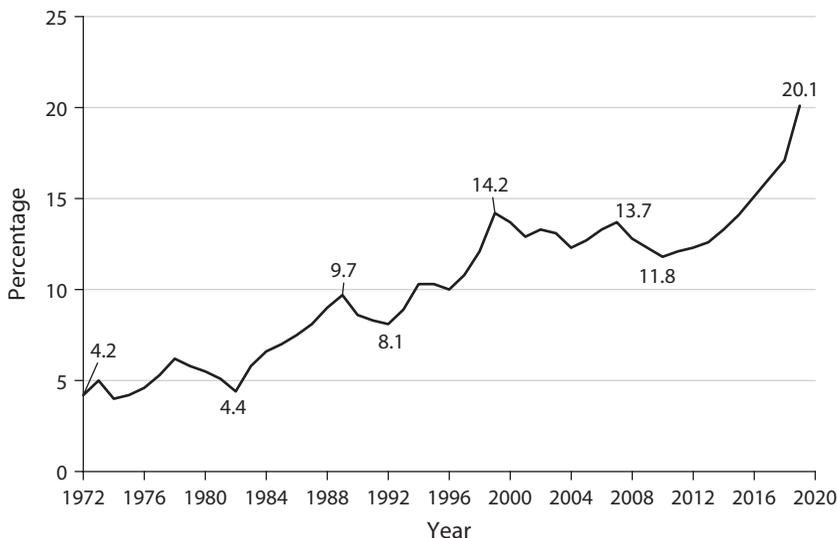


FIGURE 1.2. Percentage of Black households with incomes over \$100,000  
*Source:* U.S. Current Population Survey (Flood et al. 2021)

significant increases in household income, as shown in figure 1.2, which draws on data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey to plot the percentage of Black households earning incomes over \$100,000 from 1972 to 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). In 1972, only 4.2 percent of Black households reported earning this much income, and in 1982, the figure was still only 4.4 percent. Thereafter, the share of Black households earning more than \$100,000 rose more rapidly, reaching 9.7 percent in 1989 before turning downward slightly and then recovering after 1992 to reach 14.2 percent in 1999. After the dot-com bust of 2000, the percentage once again fell but then recovered a bit to reach 13.7 percent in 2007 when the Great Recession hit. After dropping back to 11.8 percent in 2010, it then rebounded again to reach an all-time high of 20.1 percent in 2019.

In sum, from 1972 to 2019, the share of Black households with incomes above \$100,000 rose 4.8 times. Over roughly the same period, the share of college graduates increased 4.7 times for Black men and 5.5 times for Black women, thereby greatly expanding the absolute and relative number of affluent, well-educated African Americans. As already noted, however, increases in income and education were not the only factors reshaping the size and composition of the Black upper class—immigration and intermarriage also played

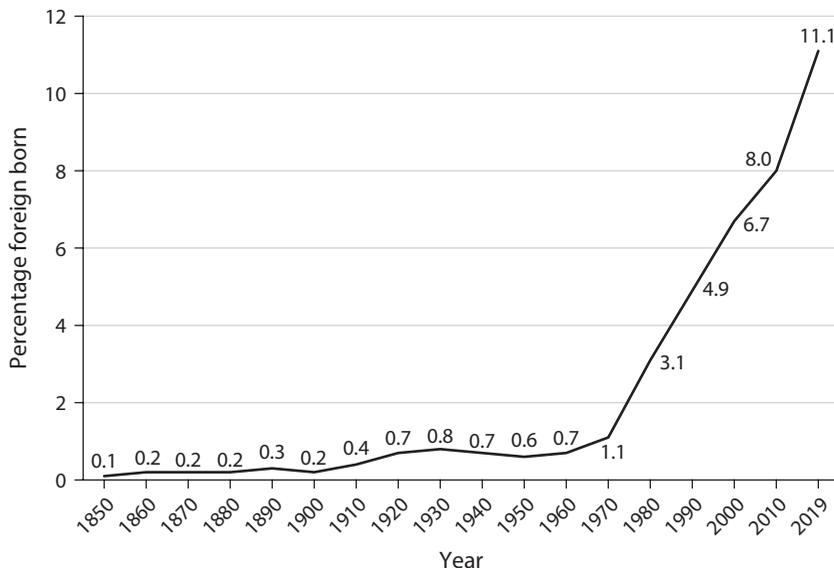


FIGURE 1.3. Percentage foreign born among Black Americans  
Sources: U.S. Census (1850–2010) and American Community Survey (2019)  
(Ruggles, Flood, et al. 2021)

an important role. Figure 1.3 therefore uses data from the U.S. decennial census (see Gibson and Lennon 1999 for 1850–1990) and the American Community Survey to plot the percentage foreign born among Black Americans from 1850 to 2019 (Ruggles, Flood, et al. 2021).

For most of U.S. history, immigrants accounted for a tiny share of all Black Americans. Prior to 1900, the share never rose above 0.3 percent. Although the share increased between 1900 and 1930 owing to the arrival of immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean, the percentage peaked at just 0.8 percent in 1930, and it was not until 1970 that the share of Black foreigners exceeded 1 percent nationwide, reaching 1.1 percent in that year. Thereafter, the percentage of foreign-born Blacks moved sharply upward, reaching 3.1 percent in 1980, 4.9 percent in 1990, 6.7 percent in 2000, 8.0 percent in 2010, and 11.1 percent in 2019, compared to a value of around 14.6 percent in the U.S. population overall.

Immigrants invariably are a selected population and not a representative cross-section of their nations of origin (Hamilton 2019). Non-refugee immigrants tend to be positively selected with respect to observable traits such as education and health as well as unobservable traits such as motivation,

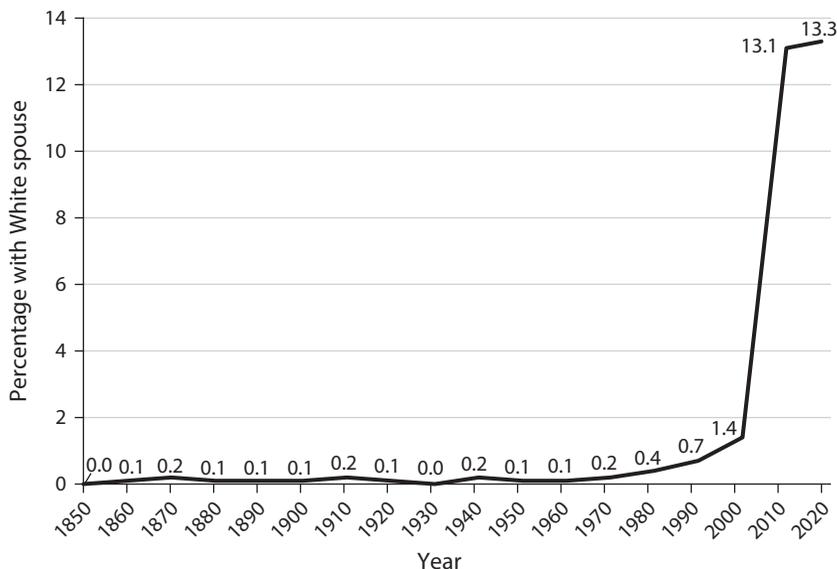


FIGURE 1.4. Percentage of Black marriages with a White spouse  
Sources: Gullickson 2006 (1850–2000) and Flood, et al. 2021, U.S. Current Population Survey (2010 and 2018)

ambition, and willingness to take risks. Given this positive selection, immigrants are generally poised to do better than natives in countries of destination (Hamilton 2019). Although they may begin life in the United States at a lower point in the socioeconomic hierarchy than natives, over time immigrants tend to catch up with and surpass natives on outcomes such as education, occupational status, and earnings (Chiswick 1978), especially if they hail from English-speaking nations (Chiswick and Miller 1998, 2010). Data suggest that this pattern prevails for African and Caribbean immigrants to the United States (Dodoo 1991, 1999; Hamilton 2012, 2013, 2014, 2019), and unsurprisingly, the children of Black immigrants are clearly overrepresented among Blacks attending selective colleges and universities (Massey et al. 2007; Model 2011; Benson 2020).

Although rates of Black-White intermarriage have been quite low historically, in recent years they have risen to generate a growing population of mixed-race individuals who are also overrepresented on the campuses of elite institutions of higher education (Massey et al. 2003). Figure 1.4 draws on data compiled by Gullickson (2006) and the U.S. Current Population Survey (Flood et al. 2021) to show the trend in the Black-White intermarriage rate for

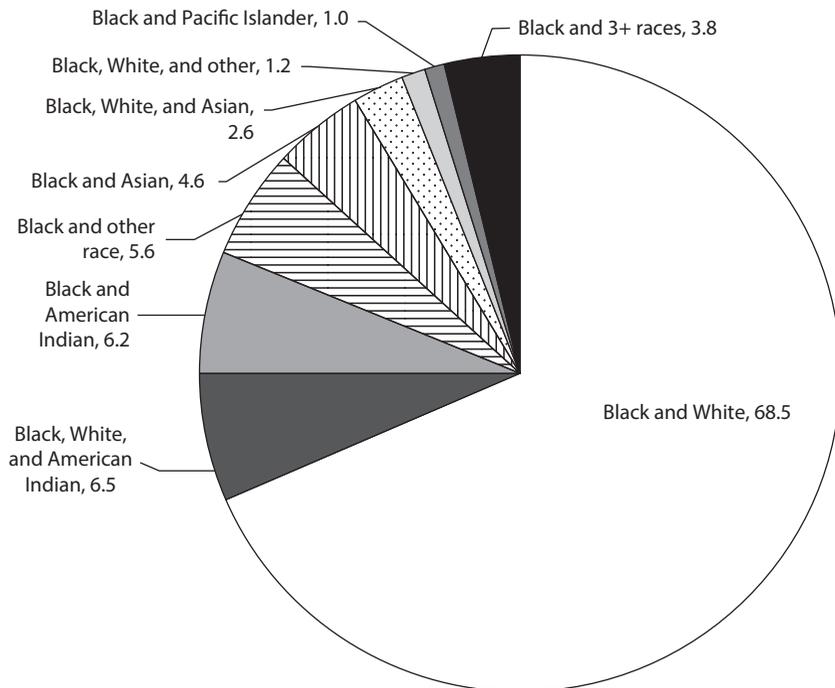


FIGURE 1.5. Composition of the Black multiracial population in 2019  
*Source:* American Community Survey (Ruggles, Flood, et al. 2021)

Black men from 1850 to 2018. From 1850 to 1970, the rate of outmarriage to White women for Black men was exceedingly low, never exceeding 0.2 percent of all marriages. In 1980, however, the rate rose to 0.4 percent and after climbing to 0.7 percent in 1990 and 1.4 percent in 2000 shot upward to 13.1 percent in 2010 and edged up to 13.3 percent in 2018. Among Black Americans, the rate of intermarriage rises with education and is twice as high for Black men compared to Black women; the gender gap widens as education increases steadily as one goes from high school or less to some college to college graduates (Livingston and Brown 2017).

A rise in the rate of interracial marriage inevitably produces growth in the number of persons who report racially mixed origins. According to data from the U.S. decennial census and the 2019 American Community Survey, the number of people reporting mixed racial origins has risen steadily over time, going from 1.7 million persons in 2000 to 3.1 million persons in 2010 and 3.7 million persons in 2015, representing 4.8 percent, 7.4 percent, and 8.4 percent of the total population reporting any Black racial ancestry, respectively (Parker

et al. 2015). Figure 1.5 shows the composition of the U.S. Black population reporting two or more races by specific combination of racial origins, as reported on the 2019 American Community Survey (Ruggles, Flood, et al. 2021).

Unsurprisingly given the composition of the U.S. population generally, the most frequently reported origins are Black and White, a combination reported by 68.5 percent of all racially mixed Black individuals in that year. The next largest categories involve American Indian origins, with 6.5 percent reporting Black, White, and American Indian origins and 6.2 percent reporting just Black and American Indian origins. The fourth largest category is Black and “other” race at 5.6 percent, followed by Black and Asian at 4.6 percent, Black, White, and Asian at 2.6 percent, Black, White, and other at 1.2 percent, and Black and Pacific Islander at 1.0 percent. All remaining categories incorporating three or more races together constitute 3.8 percent of the Black multiracial population.

Thus, more than two-thirds of racially mixed Black individuals are the offspring of unions in which one of the partners has married “up” in the American racial hierarchy by choosing a White mate, potentially enabling mixed-race children to tap into the accumulated stock of human, social, and cultural capital from the White side of the family, in addition to whatever stocks of capital may be available on the Black side, thus increasing the diversity and range of resources with which to advance in society. Black-White unions have long been known to be characterized by a “status exchange” in which a partner with a lower racial status but a higher educational status marries someone with a higher racial status but a lower educational status (Merton 1941).

Recent research suggests that this pattern continues for African Americans. Most interracial marriages are homogamous with respect to education, and as just noted, the likelihood of an interracial union increases as education rises. Among those interracially married couples who do report different levels of education, however, husbands and wives from lower racial status groups and higher educational levels generally marry spouses from higher status groups but lower educational levels (Qian 1997; Fu 2001; Torche and Rich 2017). On average, therefore, the offspring of racial intermarriages are likely to have at least one and more likely two parents with a relatively high degree of education.

## Studying the New Black Elite

Contemporary research on Black Americans has focused mainly on the plight of the poor and paid little attention to internal variation and status differentiation in the broader Black community (for exceptions, see Gregory 1998; Smith and Moore 2000, 2002; Crutcher 2010; Clerge 2019). Despite a large body of

work on racial identity, skin tone stratification, and Black immigration, these literatures are often disconnected from the contemporary study of social class within Black America. It is our goal to unite these literatures through a detailed analysis of data gathered under the auspices of the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF), a five-wave survey of students who were just beginning their college studies in the fall of 1999 and began receiving their college degrees in the spring of 2003. In doing so, we seek to open a window onto the composition and character of the emerging Black elite of the twenty-first century.

Some thirty-five selective institutions were invited to participate in the survey, which was funded by the Mellon Foundation and the Atlantic Philanthropies (see Massey et al. 2003). Equal-sized cohorts of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian students were interviewed soon after they arrived on campus and were then reinterviewed over the next four years, during the spring terms of 2000 through 2003. The baseline survey gathered comprehensive data on subjects' social origins, including detailed information about the family, school, and neighborhoods they inhabited at ages six, thirteen, and as seniors in high school, as well as data on their personal perceptions, values, aspirations, and attitudes. The follow-up surveys focused on students' social and academic experiences on campus as they proceeded through college or university, with students who transferred to other academic institutions or dropped out of school being retained as participants in the survey. Having entered college roughly at the age of eighteen, these students today must be around forty years old.

Sampling was stratified by the relative size of the Black student body at each institution. Schools with relatively large Black student populations (1,000+) were assigned a target sample size of 280 respondents (70 individuals from each of the four racial/ethnic groups), those with Black student populations of 500–1,000 got a target size of 200 interviews (50 in each group), those with 100–500 Black students had a target size of 80 respondents (20 in each group), and those with fewer than 100 Black students were assigned a quota of 40 interviews (10 in each group).

In the end, twenty-eight institutions agreed to participate in the study for an institutional response rate of 80 percent. The final sample included sixteen private universities, seven private liberal arts colleges, four public universities, and one historically Black institution (Howard University in Washington, DC). Interviewers approached 4,573 respondents across these campuses and successfully completed 3,924 interviews for an overall response rate of

86 percent. In order to be eligible for inclusion in the sample, a respondent had to be enrolled at the institution in question as a first-time freshman and be a citizen or legal resident of the United States. Here, we focus exclusively on the Black subsample of 1,039 students. To date the NLSF has provided the basis for two books, ten dissertations, and dozens of journal articles. As a result, the survey and its methodology have been well covered in prior publications, especially by Massey et al. (2003: chap. 2 and appendixes) and Charles et al. (2009: appendixes). Additional information is available from the project website at <http://nlsf.princeton.edu/>.

We originally invited three other historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to participate in the study, hoping to contrast how student social and academic outcomes unfolded over four years in predominantly Black versus majority-White contexts. Unfortunately, Howard was the only institution to accept our invitation, and the small size of its sample ( $n = 60$ ) is insufficient to sustain separate quantitative analyses comparing social and academic outcomes on predominantly Black and White campuses, and project resources did not permit the extension of qualitative fieldwork to Howard's campus.

Our analyses therefore necessarily focus on the experiences and behaviors of Black students on majority-White campuses. Nonetheless, to represent the experiences of Howard students in our portrayal of the new Black elite, we include them in both our simple descriptive and multivariate analyses. In the latter models, we use a dichotomous measure to indicate the experience of attending an HBCU like Howard and in our interpretations note distinctive departures from the rest of the sample whenever the variable proved statistically significant.

Apart from the relative absence of HBCUs, the twenty-eight institutions in the NLSF well represent the diversity of selective institutions in the United States, which range from rural small liberal arts colleges to urban Ivy League campuses to flagship public universities, which were selected to reflect geographic diversity across the United States. Choosing to attend an HBCU such as Howard is likely related to many of the social and academic outcomes we consider in later chapters. Prior research as well as autobiographical writings generally indicate that being at a place like Howard allows Black students the freedom to explore identities and academics away from the anti-Black racism common to White institutional spaces (e.g., Feagin, Vera, and Imani 1996; Willie 2003; Coates 2015).

In interviews with fifty-five college alumni from Northwestern and Howard Universities from 1967 to 1989, for example, Willie (2003) examined how

college experiences had changed for Black students during the twenty years after the civil rights movement. For Northwestern alumni, “experiencing racism was a nearly universal aspect of the college experience . . . although the incidents they describe were not constant and usually not overwhelming, and did not leave most feeling bitter in subsequent years” (Willie 2003:78). Northwestern alumni underscored the importance of getting a first-rate education that gave them increased entrée to the White corporate mainstream. In contrast, Howard alumni stressed the importance of how Howard increased their self-esteem and promoted racial pride. Willie’s respondents repeatedly detailed the nurturing, family-like climate at Howard and how faculty and peers valued their intellectual worth; void of racial hostility, the Howard alumni discussed at length how they were able to grow and develop academically and socioemotionally throughout their college tenure.

Willie’s (2003) findings represent a common theme in contemporary literature on HBCUs (e.g., Fries-Britt and Turner 2002; Gasman 2008; Kim and Conrad 2006; Palmer, Wood, and Arroyo 2015). Nonetheless, institutional racism still mars the experiences of Howard and other HBCU students. Prestigious predominantly White institutions (PWIs) like Northwestern have large endowments (Northwestern’s endowment was over \$11 billion in 2020 and the thirteenth largest in the country) thanks to donations from generations of White alumni who have had the opportunity to amass great wealth. Howard, on the other hand, relies largely on government funds to stay afloat, as structural racism has limited its Black alumni base’s ability to raise comparable wealth for the institution. Howard’s endowment is roughly \$700 million and ranks as the 158th largest as of 2020 (National Association of College and University Business Officers 2021). Willie’s (2003) interviews revealed that Howard alumni were often left without financial aid or housing because of bureaucratic mix-ups and were forced to sit for hours in the financial aid or housing office to rectify these problems. Black students who opt to attend HBCUs often come from less financially stable backgrounds and are more likely to be first-generation college students. In addition, they possess less academically relevant social and cultural capital than same-race peers who attend selective PWIs (e.g., Palmer and Gasman 2008; Burnett 2020).

In the ensuing chapters, our empirical analyses of the NLSF’s quantitative data consist mainly of simple descriptive tables that identify and analyze differences across the dimensions of Black diversity we have identified, exploring variation among students by racial identification, skin tone, nativity, generation, region of origin, gender, social class, and prior experiences of segregation. The

analysis begins by describing the dimensions themselves and then in successive chapters we move on to document variation in the traits and characteristics associated with the different dimensions and how they differentiate Black students from one another. In deriving these tables, we first applied the Statistical Analysis System's multiple imputation procedure (*SAS proc mi*) to estimate missing values. Multiple imputation is preferred to listwise deletion of variables with missing data because it allows us to keep a consistent sample size of 1,039 respondents while increasing the validity of estimated values (Allison 2001).

Due to the large number of variables in each chapter, we run a separate set of imputations independently for each chapter. Computing a single set of imputations for all variables was computationally infeasible given the complexity of the imputation algorithm, which rises as the number of missing values increases. Moreover, within each chapter, variables with missing values tend to be theoretically and mathematically related to others also under consideration, providing strong auxiliary variables for the imputation process. For composite scales we constructed from other variables, we first imputed each component variable and then created the scale after imputation. This procedure allows us to include the full sample of Black respondents while avoiding biases that single- or best-subset imputation might otherwise introduce.

Although the analyses presented in each chapter come in the form of descriptive tables, the various dimensions of Black diversity are obviously inter-related and often strongly correlated with one another, leading us to undertake a series of multivariate analyses to tease out which characteristics and outcomes are associated with which dimensions of diversity while holding the influence of all other dimensions constant. Mixed racial origins are strongly associated with a lighter skin tone, for example, while parental education is associated with segregation and nativity and generation are correlated with region of origin; all of these associations are crosscut by gendered differences between Black men and Black women, yielding a plethora of intersections (see Crenshaw 1989; Collins and Bilge 2016).

By shifting to a multivariate framework, we can identify the independent influence of each dimension of Black diversity on outcomes of interest, enabling us to disentangle, for example, the influence of racially mixed parentage from skin tone in predicting racial identity. Multivariate analysis also enables us to consider a broad range of Black intersectionalities, not just by gender but also by racial classification (monoracial or mixed race), nativity and generation, immigrant region of origin, and experience of segregation, thereby revealing the multiplicity of Black collegiate experiences.

The multivariate analyses proceed in sequential fashion following the order of chapters, going from precollege outcomes and experiences and then moving on to consider developments as they unfold on campus, beginning with an analysis of racial identities and attitudes, the parental child-rearing strategies experienced by different students, and their academic preparation for college. In addition to dichotomous indicators of categories of diversity, the multivariate models also include controls for family background factors such as household structure, maternal employment, income, home ownership, and degree of childhood exposure to disorder and violence in neighborhoods and schools. We also include whether a student attends Howard, as the one HBCU in our sample, in our multivariate models and report the significance of those findings in relevant chapter conclusions, as choosing to attend an HBCU is likely to be related to one's upbringing as well as one's experience on campus (Willie 2003). As we move sequentially from chapter to chapter, we add additional controls for other salient variables identified in the prior chapter. At each stage, we perform the same multiple imputation procedure we used in constructing the descriptive tables. All analyses are therefore performed using the unweighted sample of 1,039 Black NLSF respondents. Since the multivariate models are complex and difficult for a general audience to understand, we relegate their specification and presentation to appendix A, and in the text of the book itself, we simply summarize the main results in plain language at the conclusion of each chapter.

In order to provide additional depth and reveal the lived experiences behind the numbers, we also make use of two sources of qualitative data. The first source consists of narratives derived from seventy-eight in-depth interviews with Black undergraduates at two of the participating NLSF institutions. The subjects were full-time students aged eighteen to twenty-two interviewed in two separate waves, with forty-three done on one campus from the fall of 2000 through the spring of 2005 and thirty-five done at the second campus from the fall of 2007 through the spring of 2008. Black students comprised between 5 percent and 6 percent of the undergraduate population at both institutions. To ensure confidentiality, each respondent was given a pseudonym that was attached to all records with no additional identifying information. The last of these interviewees were set to graduate in 2004 from the first institution and in 2011 from the second institution.

Both universities consistently rank among the top institutions of higher education in the annual report published by U.S. News and World Report, with admissions rates of around 26 percent and 11 percent at the time of the

baseline survey and SAT averages of 1400 and 1450. Although both are elite private institutions, they are quite different with respect to size, setting, resources, academic climate, and access to Black-oriented activities and extracurricular options. One of the schools is known for its bucolic, small-town setting and its focus on the liberal arts. The other school is touted in college guidebooks as an “urban ivy” and is known for its preprofessional orientation; it is located adjacent to a predominantly Black inner-city neighborhood and sponsors numerous multicultural organizations, including a Black-themed dorm that serves as a hub for Black social and academic life on campus.

In compiling our qualitative data, we made explicit efforts to sample students across class years with different academic interests and a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. Interviewees, their pseudonyms, and their background characteristics are listed in appendix B. They were located using respondent-driven sampling methods in which initial contacts led to subsequent referrals that were converted into interviews (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Weiss 1994). All interviews were conducted by Kimberly Torres, who spent a great deal of time on the campuses of both institutions attending events and meeting students, not only to conduct interviews but also to discuss ongoing research and elicit feedback from respondents.

Black men were oversampled given that in the institutions surveyed Black women outnumbered Black men by a ratio of two to one (Massey et al. 2003), yielding final interviews completed with forty men and thirty-eight women. All interviews were undertaken using a semistructured guide of open-ended questions (see appendix C). Of those interviewed, 22 percent identified themselves as monoracial Blacks with multiple generations of U.S. residence, 38 percent identified as monoracial Blacks of immigrant origin (born abroad or having at least one foreign-born parent), and 40 percent said they were of racially mixed parentage. Mixed-race interviewees were specifically asked about the race and ethnicity of each parent, and more than half of all mixed-race students also reported immigrant origins.

In designing the interview guide, we used the first-wave NLSF survey instrument as a template, including questions on students’ precollege family, neighborhood, and school settings; their academic and social experiences before and during college; the factors that motivated them to attend their respective institutions; the racial and ethnic composition of their peer groups in high school and college; their social and academic adjustment to college; their conceptualization of racial identity; and their perceptions about themselves and others on campus. The guide was divided into sections and designed to

gather as much information as possible on each topic. The resulting interviews produced nuanced narrative accounts on each topic and other subjects of interest as they came up, with the interviews often lasting several hours and at times extending over several sessions. Although we did not provide monetary compensation, interviewees were typically offered lunch or dinner as an incentive. The interview response rate was 100 percent, with all respondents contacted agreeing to participate and some even seeking us out to request an interview after hearing about the project from other students.

Without exception, the young adults we spoke to provided rich and detailed accounts of their experiences growing up and living on campus. Their responses were audio-recorded and transcribed in their entirety, and the resulting qualitative data were thematically coded in coordination with the quantitative data to provide continuity between the ethnographic and survey findings. We created a textual database of all interviews and followed open and axial coding techniques devised by the grounded theorists Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). The resulting codes were used to help select narrative quotations that fleshed out and exemplified the quantitative results. A separate numerical data file on the interviewees and their traits was created to enable quantification and comparison with results from respondents to the NLSF survey.

The second source of qualitative data come from eleven focus-group sessions conducted with seventy-five students, including twenty-nine Blacks, twenty-six Whites, and twenty mixed-race persons, all of whom were undergraduate students at the “urban Ivy” university. To guide group-level conversations, the semi-structured interview guide was adapted and tailored to fit the focus-group context and three trained moderators (including Torres) led the group discussions. Six of the focus groups were stratified by race to study in-group conceptions of race and racial identity (with three White groups and three Black groups). The remaining focus groups contained an even mix of Black and White participants in order to examine the extent to which racial context influenced how students from different racial backgrounds discussed race-related topics. Same-race moderators were used for two of the Black focus groups, and Torres moderated all of the White and multiracial groups as well as one of the Black groups.

The focus-group effort was no doubt aided by the fact that Torres had already built rapport with many of the students, as roughly two-thirds of all focus-group members had participated in the interview study. The focus groups included six to ten students each, with sessions lasting one and a half to two hours. Although in-depth interviews are well suited to acquiring detailed information about

particular individuals and their experiences, the interviewer mostly determines the content and course of the conversation. In contrast, focus groups allow participants to feed off one another in their responses, thereby taking the conversation in new and different directions that might not have been anticipated by an interviewer, thus enabling an assessment of how group dynamics affect how students respond to questions about race and racial identity.

The overlap between participants in the interviews and focus-group conversations offers a lens for studying how Black, White, and mixed-race students understand race and the diverse ways they actualize their attitudes and beliefs in the company of other students. Although both the interview and the focus-group conversations were loosely guided by semistructured scripts, moderators worked to keep the group interactions as natural as possible by adopting an unrehearsed conversational tone that allowed participants to control the order of the discussion. As a result, the interview and focus groups differ from each other both in how specific questions were framed and in the order in which they were discussed. As with the interviewees, focus-group participants were given pseudonyms prior to the start of each session and conversations were recorded and transcribed in their entirety to enable both open and axial thematic coding.

In the end, our mixed-method approach aids us in providing a more nuanced and intimate portrait of what life was like for Black students on the campuses of selective colleges and universities at the turn of the twenty-first century. Although the data were originally collected to help shed light on the puzzle of minority underachievement, they also offer a detailed snapshot of the new century's Black professional class in the process of formation. At this writing, our interviewees are between twenty-nine and forty years old and presumably have made use of their elite educations to establish themselves as leaders in various endeavors both within and outside the Black community. Our data provide a unique window through which we can observe the diverse origins and varied experiences of the Black American elite as it was coming together in the early twenty-first century, enabling us to move beyond the analytic strictures of race as a master status.

## Plan of the Book

Until quite recently, the primary training ground for ambitious young African Americans was on the campuses of HBCUs. In the twenty-first century, however, aspiring Black students have increasingly sought to earn their credentials

at elite PWIs—social spaces that prior to the civil rights era were out of reach to most Black students. At present, only around 11 percent of Black college students attend HBCUs compared with 87 percent studying at historically White institutions (McClain and Perry 2017; Reese 2017). In today’s knowledge- and information-based economy in which income and wealth are generated through the control, manipulation, and application of data, earning a degree from a selective college or university has become *the* critical step in achieving elite status in the United States for upper-class families, whether Black or White (Reeves 2017).

The extent to which even the rich value an elite education for their children was starkly on display in the college admissions scandal of 2019. Prosecutors around the country discovered that wealthy celebrities, corporate executives, and hedge fund managers were paying under-the-table bribes to ensure the admission of their offspring at top-tier colleges and universities (see Stripling 2019; Taylor 2020). Attending a selective college or university today not only prepares students academically for careers in the nation’s upper class, but it also functions as a labeling mechanism that confers elite status and prestige on a rarified few.

Our aim here is to identify the traits and characteristics that differentiate Black students attending selective institutions from one another and to study how their diverse origins influence their social and academic experiences and outcomes before, during, and upon departure from college. In doing so, we seek to understand how intraracial diversity complicates traditional notions of race, class, and social mobility in the new Black professional class.<sup>2</sup> In order to capture the mindsets and experiences of *all* members of the new Black elite, we do not give each element of diversity its own chapter. Instead, we begin in chapter 2 by identifying the key dimensions of diversity, exploring the degree of heterogeneity among Black NLSF respondents with respect to ancestry, racial identification, nativity, generation, skin tone, class status, and gender. We then describe the complex interplay between these dimensions and show how they are associated with differences in parental work histories, family income, and household wealth. This analysis of intragroup heterogeneity sets the stage for a wider exploration of the consequences of diversity for student experiences and outcomes.

Chapter 3 focuses on Black diversity with respect to the level of racial segregation experienced by students during childhood and adolescence. Some NLSF respondents grew up in predominantly minority neighborhoods and attended minority-dominant schools. Others came of age in predominantly

White neighborhoods and White schools, whereas still others grew up in racially mixed residential and educational settings. Roughly 10 percent of our sample lived in predominantly minority neighborhoods but attended predominantly White, often selective, high schools. After documenting how the distribution of Black students across these categories varies by ancestry, identification, nativity, generation, skin tone, and class status, we show how differences in the degree of exposure to neighborhood and school segregation lead to sharp differences in exposure to social disorder and violence during childhood and adolescence.

Chapter 4 moves from the external world experienced by students while growing up to the internal worlds they had constructed for themselves by the time they entered college. We begin by analyzing their views on the relative importance of a Black versus an American identity. We then consider the strength of their common fate identity as African Americans—the degree to which they believe that what happens to them as individuals is linked to the welfare of the Blacks as a group—before turning to their perceptions of social distance or closeness to members of other racial and ethnic groups. After assessing the centrality of different facets of Black identity to Black student respondents, we conclude by examining the degree to which they harbor stereotypes about themselves and other racial/ethnic groups, and whether they think other groups are likely to treat people equally or discriminate on the basis of race.

Chapter 5 considers the diverse pathways by which Black students come to attend selective institutions of higher education. Beginning with their families of origin, we describe how parental child-rearing practices vary across the dimensions of Black diversity as well as the degree to which parents encouraged their intellectual independence and sought to promote their progenies' acquisition of human, social, and cultural capital. After examining what kinds of high schools the students attended and the educational resources those schools provided, we turn to an assessment of students' academic preparation for college as indicated by their high school GPAs and SAT scores. We conclude the chapter by identifying which factors most influenced students' choices about where to apply for college admission and their success in gaining access to a preferred college or university and whether it was a top-ten academic institution.

In chapter 6, we turn to an analysis of students' quotidian lives on campus, examining the day-to-day processes by which race is explored, challenged, reaffirmed, and reimaged through personal interactions on campus with strangers, friends, and romantic partners in different groups. In addition to assessing the frequency of interaction with others through ties of friendship

and romance, we assess the range of memberships in different kinds of campus organizations. We also explore the perceived visibility of different groups on campus and assess the intensity and quality of students' interactions with members of other groups. Finally, we assess the perceived degree of racial separation on campus and students' views of the institution's commitment to diversity as an important social and academic goal. In each case, we show how cross-group interactions and perceptions vary across the different subgroups of Black diversity.

Chapter 7 examines some of the downsides of attending elite academic institutions that historically were reserved mostly for Whites. Drawing on survey and interview data, we assess how often Black students were made to feel uncomfortable on campus, heard derogatory racial remarks, and were harassed by different social actors. We also present indicators of the degree to which students felt pressure to reflect well on the race while performing academically and the additional pressure they felt from parental expectations for educational achievement. We then measure the frequency and severity of negative life events that occurred within students' family networks, assess the sense of loss and alienation they might experience in moving from modest circumstances into an elite, privileged environment, the financial debt they may have accumulated over four years of college, and whether they transferred or took time off during their college career. We conclude by adapting a standard index of depression to assess the vulnerability of Black students to mental health issues and how it differs across the various dimensions of Black diversity.

Chapter 8 revisits the racial identities and attitudes respondents expressed at the beginning of college, with an eye toward understanding whether and how the elite college experience changes them. We find that at the end of college—on the eve of ascendance into elite status—the diverse origins of Black students yield far fewer differences in racial identities and attitudes among respondents than were present four years earlier. Their increasingly shared view of race, identity, and structure also gets us—especially via student interviews that criticize outdated models of how to be Black—beyond one-dimensional understandings of Blackness, Black cultural capital, and what constitutes racial authenticity. From the interview data, we learn that the burden of these racial debates about Black legitimacy take a psychic toll on those upwardly mobile young Blacks who come from the most socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and who are less willing to and adept at “fitting in” with the broader campus milieu (Torres and Massey 2012).

*(continued...)*

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