

## **The Black Middle Class, or the Harsh Reality of the American Dream**

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*Translated from the French by Oliver Waine*

**Reviewed:** Orly Clergé, *The New Noir. Race, Identity & Diaspora in Black Suburbia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2019, 320 pp.

*The suburbs of the United States, once the epicenter of racial segregation, are now home to more African Americans than ever. Drawing on her investigation of the New York suburbs, Orly Clergé demonstrates the considerable heterogeneity and fragility of the Black middle classes in a society structured by racism.*

One particularly evocative type of place sums up all the stereotypes of African Americans: Black ghettos. Orly Clergé's book *The New Noir* seeks to challenge the way Black people in the United States are all too often reduced to a single social status—poverty—and a single space—the run-down neighborhoods usually located in the inner cities in North America. “Most Black people in the United States now reside in the suburbs,” she writes, and in New York “the suburbs saw a 30% increase in Black families between 1990 and 2010” (p. 12).

It is here, in these residential spaces—the suburbs—that sociologist Orly Clergé has not only lived but also conducted a study with their inhabitants, who were often taken aback to find themselves associated with the usual clichés about Black people, such as the idea that they are irresponsible parents. For example, one Black mother recalls, with some annoyance, the compliments paid to her by a White neighbor, who was surprised by her involvement in her son's extracurricular activities—exemplary behavior that this neighbor would not have noticed in a White mother (pp. 172–173).

In devoting a long-term study to the Black suburban middle classes, Orly Clergé shatters another piece of conventional wisdom, that of “suburban Whiteness” (p. 231). In the process, she raises an important question: is the existence of a Black middle class that has seemingly achieved the American dream a sign that the “color line” (Du Bois 1903) has truly faded?

This study, undertaken in two areas of the New York suburbs (the first in the borough of Queens, in New York City; the second further east in Nassau County, Long Island), enabled Clergé to gather a wealth of material. On this basis, she answers the question above in the negative, while demonstrating the extent of the transformations that have occurred in recent decades.

### **The arduous opening-up of the suburbs to Black populations**

The establishment and protection of all-White residential suburbs has been a brutal manifestation of racial segregation since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, whether institutionalized or otherwise. From contracts designed to prohibit the sale of houses to Black people to physical attacks when these

“forbidden neighbors” nevertheless managed to venture in, everything was done to keep them out. Yet what Howard Winant (2001) calls *the Break*—the period of upheaval associated with the political movements of the 1950s through the 1970s—changed the situation definitively, as did the social mobility that Black people began finally to enjoy in the decades following World War II.

The presence of Black populations on Long Island is by no means a recent phenomenon. The historical depth of Orly Clergé’s book, which goes back to the forgotten era when slavery also existed in the North, is in this respect precious, as well as being fascinating. From the interwar period onward, she tells us, Black people from Harlem, many of them artists and intellectuals, were looking for more space in the suburbs and, far from Manhattan, reminders of the atmosphere of the South, where many of them came from. This did not occur without clashes, and the defense of residential spaces—which, as Clergé explains, form “the social laboratories where the American experience of White supremacy is tested and reaffirmed” (p. 91)—proved fierce.

It was therefore not until after World War II that middle-class Black Americans, fleeing the poverty of Brooklyn and Harlem in large numbers, moved into the still profoundly heterogeneous neighborhoods (pseudonymized in the book) that Orly Clergé chose to study: “Cascades,” in Queens, New York City, which is 77% Black and has a median household income of \$70,174 (compared to \$50,303 nationally), and “Great Park,” further east in Nassau County, Long Island, which is 29% Black, 32% White, and 32% Latino, with a median household income of \$81,315.

So, has the American dream come true? The Black residents who were able, despite all the obstacles, to settle on these quiet streets lined with single-family homes still have tough lives in many cases. Not only were they hit hard by the 2008 recession, but they also never fully seem to win their neighbors’ approval, and constantly have to prove their belonging to the middle class. “A fish bowl” (p. 238) is how one resident describes these neighborhoods, where actions are constantly scrutinized and status challenged by local elites.

While it is true that they have middle-class attributes, such as the prestige of an address in a suburb, a college diploma, and stable professions, particularly in the education and health sectors, individual trajectories are often far from smooth, marked by upward social mobility that is often exhausting, and social downgrading that is difficult to halt. From this point of view, Chapter 5 offers excellent analyses of trajectories, which are indissociably both social and migratory. For, as Orly Clergé reminds us through the expression “Black diasporic suburbs,” the broad category of “Black suburbanites” is in fact composed of three groups with very different histories: Black Americans from Southern US states who participated in the Great Northward Migration; Jamaicans; and Haitians.<sup>1</sup> Between 1964 and 1980, some 781,213 immigrants arrived from the Caribbean and Haiti, half of whom settled in New York City.

### **“Black suburbanites”: a heterogeneous group**

Incorporating this migratory diversity into analyses proves crucial. Echoing work published in France (Bréant, Chauvin and Portilla 2018), Orly Clergé shows how current systems of social stratification can be explained by individuals’ starting points, which emerge both shaken and strengthened by migration. For example, members of the Haitian upper classes fleeing the Duvalier dictatorship, from the late 1950s onward, struggled to reacquire the equivalent class markers in the New York suburbs, while the confrontation with racism in the United States was sudden and brutal.

Racism is indeed a common group experience. However—and this is another result of the survey—far from producing a single, unified Black identity, this shared experience is expressed in a multitude of “racial consciousnesses.” These do not depend only on migratory trajectories. Orly Clergé complicates the equation by highlighting the different class-conditioned ways of being Black.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the book also reflects these mixtures.

In Chapter 6, she offers a fine analysis that invalidates the sometimes pithy judgments made in other countries (notably France) about work on “race” emanating from American universities. It turns out that it is in fact necessary to read such work closely. What does Orly Clergé tell us on this matter? First, that “racial identity is both imposed and self-defined” (p. 164). Imposed, because racial categories continue to be produced and maintained in US society (Bonilla-Silva 2003). But also defined by those involved, who are heirs to the US civil-rights movement as well as to the decolonization struggles of the Caribbean. There is then a whole spectrum of relationships to “Blackness” that unfolds, around three key positions: *selective Blackness*, *pro-Blackness* and *post-racial Blackness*. In the first case, identification as Black is combined with constant efforts to relativize the importance of race, which are marked by the refusal of an exclusively Black sociability. The hope, always thwarted, is thus to escape the stereotypes and be able to enjoy their social status in peace and quiet. This is particularly true of certain middle-class Jamaicans who experience the American hierarchy but are reluctant to develop a strong racial consciousness, maintaining a moderate attitude.

However, Orly Clergé questions the classic opposition between the deeper consciousness—more closely linked to the history of American segregation—of Black Americans, on the one hand, and the Caribbean identities shaped by class, on the other, to insist instead on the idea of a continuum. Here again, political heritage and the weight of trajectories are determining factors. In this way, working-class origins are often combined with a strong attachment to “Blackness,” while the need to reaffirm a status following a perilous migratory experience may involve a “post-racial” identity, that is to say efforts, out of an acute awareness of racism, to dissociate oneself radically from Blackness and distance oneself from poorer Black populations, who are accused of making “excuses” for their situation in life.

The matter becomes even more complicated when, in addition to these questions of classification, there are boundaries within the group. Black Americans assert their moral superiority over a diaspora that has not experienced the same struggles, while Jamaicans brandish cultural markers (such as the British accent) and Haitians seek to counter the rejection of their language and their reputation as the “poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.”

At the end of a long journey, Black populations have finally reached typical middle-class spaces just a few miles from Brooklyn, a borough from which some of them originated and which is now sought after by the White middle class. In her conclusion, Orly Clergé recounts a reunion with college friends, several of whom—all White—were bemoaning their housing problems. The party was in Brooklyn, where gentrification has spread to the historically Black neighborhoods of Bed-Stuy, Crown Heights, and even Flatbush, where she herself grew up before her family bought a house in the suburbs. “It was odd to be in the apartment with gentrifiers when my family had been part of the ‘old Brooklyn.’” (p. 229). With her usual brilliance, together with a touch of irony and a good dose of humor, she reminds us, for those who may have forgotten, that racial and class boundaries may be shifting, but are still implacable.

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