

Moved Up and Moved Out: Spatial Mobility, Class and Ethnicity in Black Suburbs

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to investigate the spatial mobility patterns and processes in predominately black New York City suburb. I argue that as Haitians and Jamaicans have sought residence outside of inner city metropolitan areas, they have a unique process of choosing, relating to, and defining their ethnic and class identities in these new suburban destinations. Through a micro-demographic community study, I employ ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews and a structured survey in a multilevel analysis of community, family and individual spatial and social dynamics. The analytical plan for this paper is to document the mobility history of respondents and the role that class and generational status, household dynamics, and immigrant ethnic networks plays in the suburbanization process for Haitians and Jamaicans. Using class and suburban spatial location as controls allows us to understand the ways in which place-based and ethnic boundary work occurs in contexts outside of central cities.

Immigrants are suburbanizing at higher rates nationwide. The purpose of this research is to investigate the spatial mobility patterns and the role of ethnicity and class in a predominately black New York City suburb. For example, in 2000, the number of blacks in suburban areas increased by 13.6%, and the population of black immigrants in the same areas increased by 42.5%, totaling 42,000 residents. The socioeconomic indicators demonstrate that black immigrants have higher educational and occupational attainment than African Americans in general, yet feel the sharp affects of structural racism and continue to reside in segregated neighborhoods. Through a process of internal differentiation, however, black middle class suburbs in America have expanded in the late 20th century and an immigrant community has grown within its parameters.

I argue that as Haitians and Jamaicans have sought residents outside of inner city metropolitan areas, they have a unique process of choosing, relating to, and defining their ethnic and class identities in these new suburban destinations. The previous models that we have used to understand (black) immigrant incorporation into American society have not fully accounted for the within immigrant group class differences, which create divergent spatial and social processes. The increasing presence of suburban enclave black immigrant communities provides us with a unique opportunity to understand the transformations taking place in racial and ethnic attachment and interethnic and interracial relations among spatially and economically mobile immigrants in America. This paper comparatively addresses the following, interrelated issues among Haitian and Jamaican suburbanites: 1. the demographic history and presence of black suburban and ethnic communities and 2. the influence of suburban space on identity politics.

We know little about how black immigrants and immigrants in general fare compared to each other in their new destinations. What is the migration history of suburban Haitians and Jamaicans? What are their ethnic and class identities? How do they erect boundaries around their racial/ethnic and class identities? Data demonstrates that Afro-Caribbeans are heavily segregated from whites and marginally segregated from African Americans. But how integrated are black ethnic groups spatially and socially from each other?

The purpose of this research is to investigate the spatial mobility and integration patterns and consequent role of ethnicity and class in a predominately black New York City suburb. In 2000, the black population in Jamaica, Queens totaled 272,545, with 32% of which are foreign born. Reports demonstrate that in 2006, blacks in select Jamaica neighborhoods had higher household incomes than whites in Queens, New York. This finding challenges previous beliefs about the relationship between race and class in America. The suburban areas of Jamaica are a part of the broader research site of this project because of its high concentration of foreign born and affluent residents. Using the cases of suburban Haitians and Jamaicans in eastern New York City, I will unpack the process spatial mobility, ethnic identity formations as it pertains to their middle class status. Haitians and Jamaicans are the select groups for this study because they are the largest black immigrant group in the northeast, and are two of the top ten immigrant groups in New York City. As the service, health and financial industries have expanded in the global

city on New York, Haitians and Jamaicans in particular have been able to access and/or secure a middle class status in the past three decades. Like African American, Asian and Latino groups, these populations have increasingly sought residence in new suburban destinations in major and smaller metropolitan areas

Through a micro-demographic community study, I employ ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews and a structured survey in a multi-level analysis. The analytical plan for this paper is to document the spatial mobility history of respondents and the role that class and ethnicity plays in this process for Haitians and Jamaicans. While my hypothesis that the suburban residence of Haitians and Jamaicans has different impacts on the ways in which they understand and practice their ethnicity and status than those who reside in inner city areas, this study is incapable of looking at the pre-suburban residential location and revolving politics around identity and ethnic background. However, this cross-sectional study relies on demographic data provided by the New York City Department of Planning Community Data Portal to frame the socioeconomic context of Eastern New York neighborhoods, as well as in-depth interviews to help me unpack migration, mobility and identity histories of respondents and their families. Through the use of qualitative analysis software NVIVO, I analyze themes and relationship around class mobility, spatial mobility, migration decision making and adaptation, racial identity, household composition, intergenerational mobility within households, and community interethnic relations.

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate the ways in which ethnicity and class emerge and matter in a black suburban areas. I show how these interactions take place in the following levels:: neighborhood, ethnic group, family and individual level in Haitian and Jamaicans circles. Using class and suburban spatial location as controls allows us to understand the ways in which ethnic boundary work occurs in contexts that are outside of central cities. This is an important contribution to demographic work on stratification and immigrant because, as the post 1965 immigrant stock enters its later stages of integration, subsequent immigrant generations are growing in size and have higher socioeconomic characteristics. Like the African American middle class, they are increasingly seeking residential locations that are quieter, that provide better social services and superior schools, have less crime and violence prone, and that have a cultural and racial character that reflects their own. However, they are also constrained in their residential choices by a racialized housing market. Despite the out-migration of immigrants to suburbia and related social processes in the past 20 years we understand little about their residential decision-making process, the quality of the suburbs in which they live, how they are faring, and the ways in which their spatial and class mobility has influenced their ethnic and racial understandings of self and others. We know more about African American and Asian suburban areas, however, this study attempts to unpack how black immigrant groups manage racial, class and ethnic distinctions. This dissertation is a preliminary investigation of the ways in which class and space affects how immigrants understand their origins and their futures. It seeks

to unpack the ways in which class, race and ethnicity work in black suburban areas, spaces which are often left off the radar of social scientist interested in space, integration, race, and ethnicity.