



The Code of the Streets

By Ta-Nehisi Coates, Aug. 2, 2011

Via Gawker, this is interesting if unsurprising:

The average affluent black and Hispanic household -- defined in the study as earning more than \$75,000 a year -- lives in a poorer neighborhood than the average lower-income non-Hispanic white household that makes less than \$40,000 a year.

"Separate translates to unequal even for the most successful black and Hispanic minorities," says sociologist John Logan, director of US2010 Project at Brown University, which studies trends in American society.

"Blacks are segregated and even affluent blacks are pretty segregated," says Logan, who analyzed 2005-09 data for the nation's 384 metropolitan areas. "African Americans who really succeeded live in neighborhoods where people around them have not succeeded to the same extent."

The disparities are strongest in large metro areas in the Northeast and Midwest where segregation has always been high. It's lowest in more recent booming parts of the Sun Belt.

"White middle-class families have the option to live in a community that matches their own credentials," Logan says. "If you're African American and want to live with people like you in social class, you have to live in a community where you are in the minority."

I think it's important to tease out the two sides of this story. One reason why it's bad to compare blacks and whites of equal "income" is hinted at here. Your immediate family may well be technically middle-class, but if you're a black kid, there's a very good chance that your social circle isn't. This is to say nothing of cousins, friends of family and so on. And this obviously has some implication when we talk about neighborhood institutions, (like public schools, culture, and social capital.)

With that said, I think it's also really important to also consider the benefits of being a member of an ethnic group, where you tend to have more cross-class contact than the norm. My parents both had college degrees. But virtually none of my friend's parents did. The result was that I was always between worlds.

On the one hand there was the code of the streets, which you really needed to know in order to protect yourself from bodily harm. And then there was the code of the Coates home, in which reading and writing were important, and the personal computer was privileged over the Atari. It would be wrong to see these two codes as always in conflict--indeed my parents very much had values which we might call "street." (The importance of defending yourself, for instance, was big in my house.) But in general the two worlds didn't really enforce each other, and sometimes they were directly at odds.

It's tempting to say that was a bad thing. In fact, as I've said before, the experience made me bilingual and allowed me a certain access to spaces that I could not imagine having otherwise. Indeed, I admit some sadness as I grow older and I feel myself losing a particular language that explains less and less about my life. I am sad because the fact that a space is troubled, doesn't mean that you don't enjoy it.

This is the first year of my life that I've ever lived in a non-hood; I was born to Park Heights, and everywhere I lived after that was some variation. It's the smallest things I miss. At my neighborhood grocery store, people are a little ruder and think nothing of cutting the line. For awhile I couldn't understand why no one would say anything when this happened.

Cutting the line rarely happened in Harlem because to do so, was to risk a literal cutting. Thus a kind of uneasy, but pleasant, respectfulness prevailed. If you've ever been to certain black nightclubs you can see the same thing--a kind of reserved, almost studied, politeness. But there's no real violence here, or threat of it. People have too much to lose. Someone cutting you in a line is a big deal when you coping with the grinding disrespect of poverty. When you're only coping with keeping up a private school payment, not so much.

I love my new neighborhood, but it's funny, I can't say I won't move back. You get used to the rhythm of your people. And, troubled or not, you love it.

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