Chapter 4

Place, Space and Race:
Monopolistic Group Closure and the
Dark Side of Social Capital

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Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, suburban developments made up of detached single-family dwellings surrounded by grass and tree-lined streets have held the utopian promise of refuge from the disorganized, congested, crime-ridden city for the most prosperous of the American working and middle classes (Fishman 1987). The community of Runyon Heights is no exception. Situated in the northeast section of Yonkers, New York, Runyon Heights looks like many middle-class suburban settlements. Amid private homes dotted by picket fences and prize-winning flower gardens live more than 1378 residents that comprise some 352 middle-class families. In 1990, median family income in the area was $43,500, slightly above that of the City of Yonkers and well above the national figure of $35,353. In stark contrast, only 56 percent of the homes in Runyon Heights were owner-occupied, a figure significantly below the national average.

Runyon Heights stands out among American suburban communities for another important reason: the majority of its nearly 1400 residents are black. While three small black middle-class residential enclaves also developed in Yonkers in the first half of the twentieth century, only the residents of Runyon Heights were able to establish a stable home-owning enclave that was not overwhelmed by the forces of ghettoization. The stories of these middle class residents reveal the link between race and class inequality in the organization of American suburban communities and sheds light on the role of social capital in the lives of the suburban middle class. Social capital was critical to their success. But Runyon Heights also reveals the dark side of social capital by drawing attention to its unequal distribution and its contradictory role within a historically segregated context. Our case demonstrates that

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1 This chapter is based on fieldwork collected by the first author between 1991 and 1993. A portion of this data has appeared in Red Lines Black Space: The Politics of Race a Space in a Black Middle-Class Suburb, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.
3 Sigelman and Welch (1991) report that 'Blacks' prefer the term black over African
even middle-class blacks had to bridge their marginalized networks to resource-rich white-dominated networks in mainstream institutions before they could effectively defend their collective interests.

Bourdieu's understanding of the concepts of social capital enables us to see how racial and class distinctions are reproduced in a suburban setting. Drawing from Bourdieu, we will follow the definition of social capital that others have also used in this book: social capital consists of the socially imbedded resources that actors draw upon through their social ties for instrumental purposes (Frank and Yasumoto 1998, Coleman 1994; Lin 1999, 2001; Burt 1992, 1997, 2000; Portes 1998; Fernandez-Kelly 1995). Specifically, we focus on the role of social capital as a resource for constructive civic engagement and the assertion of collective interests.

While some scholars have identified a need to explore the less desirable consequences of social capital (Portes 1998, 15; Lin 2001, 95; Arneil 2006), most have focused on its positive effects. Scholars like Robert Putnam view civic engagement as a panacea for the complex web of social problems plaguing poor urban neighborhoods — but 'understate the importance of race and ethnicity in their conceptualization and analysis' (Hero 2003, 120). To call for civic engagement through associations and social networks misses the point that these institutions and informal networks have long-existed in black communities like Runyon Heights, but they did not insulate prosperity among residents, nor were they sufficient to protect community interests. Indeed, implicit in Putnam's call for a revival of civic unity and virtue is the transcendence of difference (Arneil 2006, 7). According to Putnam, transcending difference allowed for the creation of a common civic culture. But the civic unity forged during the Progressive era and idealized by Putnam was imbedded within a racialized framework that designated black Americans as racially outside of mainstream social life. Thus Putnam misstates the problem when he links growing American diversity to declining levels of social capital, or when he frames the American dilemma as the tension between fraternity and equality (Putnam 2000, 354). Rather than looking to explain urban politics by looking at how government policy and the shape of the urban infrastructure shapes civic participation, Putnam suggests that liberty itself is at odds with fraternity and that immigration and desegregation have threatened civil society because people who are different simply cannot get along.4

At a basic level, the inequality inherent to segregation meant residents had limited social capital resources from which to mobilize and promote community interests. As Loury (2002) observes, '... access to developmental resources is mediated through race-segregated social networks ... (103).' In Yonkers, local white citizens, representatives of city government, school officials, and private employers used race to bound public institutions and social networks, a process that created social closure around whiteness and fostered black social and political disenfranchisement from white dominated institutions, while also encouraging civic trust and race solidarity among blacks. In the post-World War Two era, key individuals served as brokers between black social capital networks (black social capital)5 and resource-rich white networks. Green, Tigges, and Browne (1995) note that bridging ties outside of segregated contexts are necessary for residents of the black community to find employment, and DeFilippis (2001) notes that 'bridging capital' is needed when a community's residents are poor (790). We assert that bridging capital, the establishment of 'weak ties' that expand the opportunities of closed social networks, is necessary for the black middle class community of Runyon Heights as well (Granovetter, 1973, Burt 2000).

The ability of the Runyon Heights community to access resource-rich white-dominated networks and institutions in Yonkers has been constrained by a complex set of historical and contextual factors. The residents of Runyon Heights have always been concerned with maintaining good schools, property values, and safe, clean streets. Like other members of the suburban middle class, they have staked a claim on the American Dream by actively engaging in their local community. In fact, community institutions and organizations have been prominent in Runyon Heights for well over seventy years; when community interests were undermined by outside forces, voluntary associations centered and coalesced residents. Collective solidarity was bolstered by the community's repeated confrontations with local government, school officials, local industry, and neighboring white residents. Relegated by race to the margins of the respectable bourgeoisie, the black residents in Runyon Heights used their social and human capital5 resources to fight for schools, jobs, political participation, and the general interests of community residents.

Community access to resource-rich white-dominated networks and institutions accelerated significantly following the formal dismantling of state-imposed segregation after World War II. Residents who attended the locally integrated elementary school, School I, during the twenties and thirties were, by the nineteen fifties, serving as brokers between the black community and white networks that dominated mainstream institutions. Interracial friendships that had developed during the early decades at School I were constrained by strict norms that discouraged racial endogamy, but once state support of race waned, these personal connections and friendships could function publicly to bridge group networks. By linking the thick social networks of the black residents of Runyon Heights, these brokers created bridges that proved critical to community influence in the local civic arena and crucial to defending community interests. In fact, Runyon Heights reveals the importance of context and history in determining the ability of residents to activate both strong and weak ties in mobilizing resources for community defense.

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5 Marion Orr makes a distinction between Black social capital and inter-group social capital. Black social capital refers to its interpersonal and institution forms within the African-American community. Inter-group social capital refers to cross-sector formations of mutual trust and networks of cooperation that bridge the black-white divide, especially at the elite level of sociopolitical organization. Orr's definition closely resembles the use of Granovetter's (1973) weak ties concept and the brokerage functions described by Burt (2000).

6 Coleman, Bourdieu, and Lin all suggest that social capital can produce human capital and vice versa.
These networks, rich in human capital, were a necessary but not sufficient condition for black civic empowerment and what Putnam calls ‘effective government’. Types of capital differ in their ‘liquidity and convertibility’, and ‘by comparison to [to economic capital] the convertibility of social capital into economic capital is costlier and more contingent; social capital is less liquid, “stickier”, and subject to attrition’ (Anheier et al. 1995, 862). The ability to exchange or transfer social capital for political influence was dependent upon the state institutional environment and not merely on the vibrancy of residents’ social networks or the amount of human capital imbedded in the group. Changes in federal policy in the post-war era encouraged black mobilization, participation, and inclusion in the civic arena. Similarly, both whites and blacks increased their acceptance of friendships across the color line, especially instrumental relationships, which partially opened political access to white networks. This shift in racial policy is best symbolized by the landmark 1954 Brown decision, which signaled the incorporation of blacks into the nation’s political institutional framework. In Runyon Heights, Brown encouraged a shift in organizational strategy from the inward focus of church and social clubs to the outward focus of local voluntary associations, like the Runyon Heights Improvement Association (R.H.I.A). Civic engagement in voluntary associations like the R.H.I.A. is paradoxically rooted in resident’s reactions to the forces of exclusion from white civic organization. Thus social capital among the black middle class residents of Runyon Heights is both encouraged and limited by the racialized character of civil society and the role of state institutions in maintaining racial segregation.

Social Capital

Social capital is a popular metaphor for social advantage, but the social processes encompassed by the concept are not new and have deep roots in American social science (Burt 2000, 2; Portes 1998, 5). Many contemporary scholars commonly define social capital as some combination of resources embedded in social networks that are activated by trust.

Scholars have been consistent in recognizing that social capital is a characteristic created by and held within the group (Burt 1997, 339). James Coleman, who was the first to popularize the concept within the social science community in the late nineteen eighties (DeFillips 2001, 784; Portes 1998, 6) defines social capital in broad terms by its function (1994: 302); it consists of some aspect of social structure that facilitates the productive actions of trusting individuals within that structure. In asserting that ‘... social organization constitutes social capital’ (304), he echoes the ecological models of an earlier generation of Chicago school scholars. For Coleman, social capital is simply social organization based on trust; it is, by definition, productive. While many of the definitions used by social scientists overlap in their emphasis on either the individual actor or the social structure, Portes (1998) concludes that a growing consensus is emerging among sociologists. Focusing on the individual level, he suggests that ‘... social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures’ (6).

While Putnam has recently re-ignited the social capital debate and provides the focal point for our discussion, it is Bourdieu who provides the first systematic analysis of the concept (Portes 1998, 3) and the foundation for the theoretical approach deployed here. Bourdieu defines social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital’ (1997). The amount of social capital depends on both the size of the network of connections one can mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural) possessed by each of those to whom he is connected. In Bourdieu’s view, social capital remains a collective asset shared by members of a defined group; access to social capital is dependent upon being a member of a closed network.

Bourdieu’s concept of social capital has strong implications for understanding the reproduction of class and race among the black residents of Runyon Heights. Unlike either Coleman or, as we shall see, Putnam, Bourdieu draws attention to unequal group-based power relations. His notion suggests that both race-based and class-based groups comprise sets of social relationships that regulate the distribution of power and status. Institutionalized racial boundaries in Runyon Heights in the pre-Brown era limited access to resource rich white social networks, and consequently, to Capital in all of its forms.

Monopolistic Group Closure and the Racial Dimensions of Social Capital

While Bourdieu’s model has been traditionally interpreted as one that underscores the reproduction of class boundaries, our focus is on the consequences of the racialization and segregation of black social networks. Prior to Brown, black institutional exclusion encouraged white racial endogamy and guaranteed that the
social capital of blacks held less relative value than that of whites. Glenn Loury (1977) was one of the first scholars to re-emphasize the social origins of social capital, asserting that an individual’s social origin ‘has an obvious and important effect on the amount of resources that is ultimately invested in him or her development’. More recently, Fernandez Kelly (1995) has argued that social capital is toponomical, that is, dependent on physical and social location. She contends that because people derive their knowledge from the social and physical spaces in which they live, the environment constrains social possibilities. Lin (1999; 2001) contends that social capital is contingent on both the initial structural positions in the social hierarchy and the extent of social ties. We draw from Bourdieu’s model and focus on the importance of the diminished value of black social capital networks. Due to the unequal distribution of power imbedded in social institutions, individuals and groups have differential access to social capital networks and not all networks wield equal power. While group membership for residents of Runyon Heights was defined by a combination of race- and class-based boundaries, repeated exchanges (investment) among group members, what Coleman calls obligations (Coleman 1994, 300–324), both reinforced recognition of the group and dictated the boundaries of inclusion, which reinforced racial solidarity within the community.

Long before Bourdieu, Max Weber made similar observations concerning groups and status differentiation in his famous essay ‘Ethnic Groups,’ where he argued that the social goods of nobility and honor are tied to race in American society (Weber 1968, 386), and that racial group boundaries were solidified in the post-Emancipation era as a way for whites to monopolize social power and honor. He posited that the incorporation of African-American slaves into the status hierarchy of the late nineteenth century led to a curtailment of the patriarchal discretion previously exercised by white slave masters, and that a rigid color line was necessary to redraw group distinctions following Emancipation. In Weber’s words, ‘the smallest admixture of Negro blood disqualifies a person unconditionally’ from the white group (1968).

Referring to the post-Reconstruction South, Weber concluded that ‘the social honor of ‘poor whites’ was dependent upon the social declassement of the Negroes’ (Weber 1968, 391.) Weber identified this kind of group honor as ‘ethnic honor’, a process closely related to status honor (Weber 1968, 390); by the 1920s, the one-drop rule had reclassified people of mixed African and European ancestry as black (Davis 1991). In short, in the post-Emancipation era, racial categories were used as a basis for white racial endogamy. Those defined as “white” drew closure, limited identification with their racial kin, and formed a monopoly on power that was constituted in their segregated social networks; whites experienced an inclusive structure and social entitlement that reinforced group networks.

Historically in the United States, race may be even more significant than class in the distribution of social resources. ‘Race’ has been used to imply a breeding lineage that embodies inbred and innate human differences (Smedley 1993, 39). By the early twentieth century, blacks were widely regarded as an inferior and distinct biological group; racial endogamy and the adoption of the one-drop rule helped to produce the illusion of distinct bounded racial groups and set the stage for the racialization of suburban residential and civic life. Until the post-War era, race was used to solidify a social hierarchy that kept blacks on the bottom and permitted economic mobility for whites (Smedley 1993, 206). Weber’s insight into the process of monopolistic group closure is consistent with Bourdieu’s; both scholars suggest that social capital is something more than ‘connections’. The power and influence of a community’s social capital and its ability to protect civic life are not merely dependent upon the volume of resources or the size of the group membership, as scholars have suggested. They also depend on the status (nobility) of the group that holds the social capital. As such, the black category symbolizes the absence of power, regardless of the presence or absence of networks. Total social exclusion was the norm for Blacks across northeastern suburban communities before World War II.

As Michael Omi and Howard Winant point out, prior to the war, state institutions were racial institutions that enforced the racial politics of everyday life (Omi and Winant 1994, 83). The Federal Housing Authority’s (FHA) policies, widely known as redlining, directly contributed to the widespread use of restrictive covenants by white property owners. Both the FHA and the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) issued residential security maps to describe desirable and undesirable areas for investment by the banking industry. Black residential areas (marked in red) and racially mixed areas were deemed undesirable investments. Public policy throughout the first half of the twentieth century supported racial homogenization of residential areas, thus contributing to the devaluation of black-owned property (Jackson 1985, 199–218; Oliver and Shapiro 1995, 40; Palen 1995, 121). State policies were directly responsible for encouraging the development of racially-based racial networks.

Omi and Winant argue that state institutions set the ‘rules of the game’ and ‘the limits for political legitimacy in general’ (83). Prior to the Second World War, racial rule restricted the growing urbanized black population from entry into the political sphere and set the limits for their mobilization within civil society (Winant 2001, 112). It denied commonalities between otherwise similar whites and idealized racial categories as all-embracing social differences. Barred from participation in the broader civil society, the residents of Runyon Heights were engaged in what Omi and Winant describe, and what Antonio Gramsci call, a war of maneuver. Under the oppressive conditions of the racial state, subordinate groups sought to extend their territory, ward off violent assault, and develop an internal society (Omi and Winant 1994). The nineteen forties marked the beginning of the democratization of state institutions and a concomitant shift in the strategy of residents from a war of maneuver to a war of position. This second strategy, predicated on local political struggle, was encouraged by the evolving post-war institutional environment; community organizational efforts shifted from religious and social activities to political activities and community defense. Consistent with the classic description of a war of position, having a voice in the political system was a precondition for open confrontation in Runyon Heights (Winant 2001, 113).

down as unconstitutional anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited marriage between people of European and African descent. By 1970 only 65,000 black/white interracial marriages were recorded nationwide (Davis 2002: 98).
Recent scholars have mischaracterized social capital as a cultural phenomenon that reflects enduring group norms that cannot be explained in terms of rational values or social structure (Jackman and Miller 1998). In his early work, which seeks to explain differences in the development of regional government in Italy, Putnam argued that the lack of ‘civic culture’ of particular regions has condemned them to stunted citizenship, meager social and cultural associations, fear of lawlessness, and the demand for stern discipline (Putnam 2002). These ‘uncivic’ regions lack voter-turnout, newspaper readership, membership in choral societies, literary circles, and social and sports clubs (Putnam 1993).

In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Putnam turns his focus to the United States and again emphasizes the importance of trust in establishing norms and networks that encourage civic engagement and serve as preconditions for economic development and effective government. He contrasts romantic images of the good society circa 1950 with selective contemporary evidence to argue that people are no longer producing social capital by ‘schmoozing’ in bowling leagues, but now spend their time isolated and engaged in spectator activities like ‘bowling alone’. This, he argues, accounts for the decline in political participation of the past decades, a claim that has been critically discussed by others (for example Lin 2001).

Important for our purpose here is that Putnam maintains that culturally grounded connections between individuals are by definition a public good and lead to good government. While citing voluntary associations and bowling leagues as preconditions for the good society, he discounts the significance of the dark side of social capital, such as youth gangs and organized crime. While Putnam acknowledges in *Bowling Alone* (2000), ‘some kinds of bonding social capital may discourage some kinds of bridging capital and vice versa,’ we emphasize the role of the state in shaping segregation racial endogamy, and the formation of closed social networks around whiteness that also serve the role of restricting access to social goods (362).

Putnam’s view of social capital as a public good is consistent with Coleman’s position that ‘... despite the public-good aspect of social capital, the more extensive persons call on one another for aid, the greater will be the quantity of social capital generated’ (Coleman 1990, 321). Putnam’s conception of social capital as predicated upon a common cultural orientation echoes that of Coleman, who views social capital as tantamount to social organization. But while Coleman emphasizes structural constraints and the rational responses of actors in explaining the development of social capital, Putnam privileges culture as the driving force. Lowry and Fernandez-Kelley side with Coleman, recognizing that social groups are segregated by race as well as by class and that different social capital networks have uneven value and power. Weber reminds us that social capital is more than a way to measure the social networks of Bourdieu’s model and the civic engagement of Putnam’s model; it is also a mechanism for closure and the reproduction of unequal group status along racial lines. This unequal distribution is significant when assessing the value of the segregated networks that developed in Runyon Heights, and it informs our understanding of both Putnam and Bourdieu’s conception of social capital as ‘schmoozing’ and having ‘connections’. As Lin (2000) observes, scholarship widely supports the notion that social capital is unevenly distributed across social groups (787). The unequal capital distribution between the black and white middle classes in all of its forms had dire consequences for the residents of Runyon Heights.

A summary of recent literature reveals four central functions of social capital: 1) as a source of social control for parents, teachers and communities (Zhou and Bankston 1996; McNeal 1999; Coleman 1988, 1997); 2) as a source of support for families and communities (Coleman 1988; MacGillivray 2002); 3) as a source of employment and mobility (Loury 1997, 2002; Granovetter 1973), 4) as a basis for civic engagement and governmental performance (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Putnam 1995). We will turn to an examination of three of the four functions of social capital identified above: as a source of support for families and communities, as a source of control for parents and teachers, and as a basis for civic engagement and governmental performance.

Community Institutions and the Development of Social Capital

Interviews and archival sources revealed that Newcomers to the Runyon Heights community since the 1920s have experienced racial steering and racially-biased mortgage practices that directed them specifically to the area. These practices were part of an inhospitable social climate based on the stigma10 of race that encouraged both the development of an all-black residential area and the formation of local institutions and social networks along racial lines (Haynes 2001). According to Goffman (1963), stigmatization hinders the development of social networks between normals and the stigmatized because of the tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized to their close connections (30). One result of racial stigmatization was that neighboring areas were developed using racially restrictive covenants that barred blacks. Although restrictive covenants would be deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in the Shelley v. Kraemer (1948) decision, black residents in Westchester County region have continued to experience racial steering practices and resistance from white homeowners into the 1990s.

The south, east, and west sides of Runyon Heights are bounded by major boulevards, and the north is bordered by a four-foot-wide strip of land adjacent to a nearly all-white community named Homefield. In 1924, the ‘reserve strip’ was created by the Homeland Company, the developer that subdivided the estate that was to become Homefield, with the clear purpose of marking a physical boundary between Black-dominated Runyon Heights and the new predominantly-white

10 Erving Goffman (1963) outlined the concept of stigma in his classic work, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). A stigma is a stereotyped physical attribute or sign that discredits the moral character of the possessor. It is an undesired difference that reduces a person to something less than human (3–6). Goffman identified three types of stigmas: abominations of the body; blamishes of individual character; and the tribal stigma of race, nation and religion. He argued that stigma is part of a system of honor; it is a relationship between status groups: the normals and the stigmatized (7). The central feature of the stigmatized individual’s situation is ‘acceptance’ by the normals and normals tend to avoid association with the stigmatized, except for a minority, who are called ‘the wise’ (30). One might argue that bridging networks constitutes a type of ‘wise’ individual.
community. The exclusionary motivation behind the creation of the reserve strip was made clear by the Homefield Association’s purchase and maintenance of the strip in 1947. Additionally, Homefield properties used restrictive covenants to bar Negro homeowners. A deed dated 1935 from Curtis Lane, near the Homefield-Runyon border, contained a typical restrictive covenant: ‘The granted premises shall be sold only to and occupied by members of the Caucasian race.’ Not only did the reserve strip result in dead-end streets in Runyon Heights, but it also served as a symbolic reminder of white racial exclusivity and black rejection (Haynes 2001). Spatial demarcations provided an important context for the reproduction of racial endogamy and the formation and solidification of segregated social institutions and networks. Homefield remained virtually all white into the 1940s and 90 percent white as late as 1990 (Haynes 2001). While the strip created dead-end streets between Homefield and Runyon Heights that helped to isolate the neighborhood from outsiders and provide a protective environment for local children, it reinforced the symbolic link between race and place; since Runyon Heights was known across the region as a place where blacks lived, race made place, and, in doing so, place symbolically reproduced race.

During the early years, four categories of community institutions were significant sites for the development of social capital resources for the families and the community of Runyon Heights: the family, the church, voluntary social and political organizations, and the local elementary school. Multigenerational ties between families developed early on in Runyon Heights; marrying the gal or guy next door and moving back to the neighborhood was not uncommon among the first generations of residents. After the family, the church has long been recognized as the second most important institution in the black community (Frazier 1948: 333; Runyon Heights is no different. Early generations of blacks in the city of Youkrs were unwelcome at established ‘white’ churches. By the 1870s several all-Negro churches had begun to develop (Haynes 2001). Finding an inhospitable climate at the all-white churches in their area, newcomers to Runyon Heights formed a small prayer group. The group continued to recruit members as new folks, and by 1931, when the group dedicated a church building, membership had grown considerably. The group now joined the African Methodist Episcopal Church, naming their new church Metropolitan. By this time, the church had established itself as a central community institution and many of the most prestigious families in the area were members.

The cultural and religious orientations of the original Runyon Heights residents varied greatly from unskilled rural Baptists and Methodists to skilled Catholics from the Caribbean. Nevertheless, racial segregation encouraged cooperative community activities from the outset. Black and white adults remained socially segregated from one another; a largely Italian-born Catholic minority that lived in the neighborhood largely kept to itself, while other whites shunned black participation in local social and religious life. Social isolation and marginality encouraged blacks to create their own social world. They established a church, social clubs, sports leagues, and civic and political associations. Barely fifty years after the end of Reconstruction, a thriving black suburb was making its bid for inclusion in the American Dream.

The church provided the key institutional anchor for these developing social networks. It welcomed new members into the community, provided them with a sense of place and group identity, and fostered strong communal solidarity and trust between group members. The church represents a source of ethnic/racial solidarity and a form of bonding capital within the group, rather than a source of bridging capital linking Runyon residents to resource-rich white networks (Arneil 2006, 170). While never a direct source of political mobilization, the church in Runyon Heights nevertheless remained the hub for strong inter-generational family networks and served to extend these networks deep into community life. A number of civic-minded groups like the Men’s Club and the Women’s Civic Club were a direct outgrowth of Metropolitan A.M.E.

Numerous collective associations took the form of social clubs that held overlapping membership and provided a rich network of ‘connections’ that could be invoked for specific community-oriented goals. Over the next two decades, Runyon Heights evolved into a community of hyper-organized social networks and effective ties. One long-time resident explained about growing up in Runyon Heights in terms that echo Putnam and the idyllic American community:

And it has a link I think through our morals and our values again because you know it was kind of a place – where everybody knows everybody else as a child, everybody else, at least back when I was growing up, is your supervisor or guardian and you were a little more restrained about doing things because you always kind of had eyes on you all the time. And I’d like to feel that in other communities that might not have been the case. You know, in other communities where maybe the first, some of the first and strongest links are made through you know schools and things like that, and being next door neighbors and belonging to school organizations, a lot of the initial links, I mean even as a child is family links. I mean people who I met later on through school or through participating in sports together, that was because again, my mother’s sister-in-law, her cousin or sister-in-law, her kids, it’s just family. Basically kind of started as this large extended family, it kind of, you know, gets down to your core family, but I think you meet first that way too. There’s always a family kind of thing. People out here identify themselves as being a part of such and such family. They identify somebody’s house, that’s the so and so house, and that’s the way you do normally with, let’s say a town or a larger area, but people out there still say that. They’ll say well the car is parked out in front of the so and so house. That family could have been out of that [house] seventy years ago, but this person is going to say the so and so house … That’s how we identify things. And we identify a lot of things here by people. I am Joe Jones’ son. I am Carol Jones’ son. Until I get to a certain point, and maybe when my generation dominates a little bit then and my kids will be, that’s Pete Jones’ son.

The third most important source for the development of social capital was the local voluntary association, the Runyon Heights Improvement Association (R.H.I.A.). Founded in the 1920s, it has remained the principal civic organization throughout the community’s history. Originally, the R.H.I.A. was oriented towards fostering neighborhood, social activities, and children’s recreation, and scholars have noted that dense social networks and residential stability fosters strong social organizations and safe neighborhood environments (Patillo 1999). Women members proved to be
a critical resource by publishing a newsletter called the Nepperhan Civic Recorder, which was an important source linking resources and information. A number of clubs and associations listed in the Recorder in 1933, such as the Women’s Civic Club, The Men’s Club, and the Mother’s Club, have maintained intergenerational membership and still exist today. Other groups, like the local all-Negro baseball team the ‘Runyon AC’s,’ survived little more than a generation.

Soon after it’s founding, the R.H.I.A. built a small community center, which locals called the Community House. Complete with ping pong and pool tables and adult supervision, it provided a meeting place for community youths. The Community House was soon destroyed by a fire in the late 1930s, and the R.H.I.A. declined in importance over the next twenty years. In 1956, a city-proposed public housing complex prompted the reactivation of the R.H.I.A., and a second community house was dedicated in 1963. The R.H.I.A. has moved beyond its original function as a recreational facility for children. Not only has it been a place to hold community meetings, throw holiday parties for local children, and provide recreation, but it has increasingly come to serve as a political instrument that represents and protects community interests. We will revisit this topic in the next section.

The fourth institution that proved critical for the development of social capital in Runyon Heights was the local elementary school, School 1. Because the population in the region was generally dispersed, School 1 served both black and white children from the surrounding area. As a result, the school was integrated for nearly two decades. Not only did the school provide its first black pupils with unprecedented access to quality elementary education; it also served an important role in the organization of civic life. School 1 was a place where multiple generations attended; teachers, students, and the community were intertwined. The building itself provided a central meeting place for Runyon Heights parents. Even the local Boy Scout troop held meetings there. School volunteering, local PTA’s, and informal ties to educators have shown to increase the amount of information about schooling available to parents and even intensify ties among parents in the local community (Lareau 1989). While black residents in Runyon Heights formed their own collective associations, like the local Parent Teachers Association and the Men’s Club, and joined national Christian-based associations like the Prince Hall Masons and the Order of the Eastern Stars, what should not be overlooked is that all of these groups held much less power relative to white Protestant and white voluntary associations (Arnell 2006, 23).

While black and white adults in the area were generally cordial to one another, they socialized little. Occasionally, black and white children established lasting friendships, some of which would later serve as bridges to white social capital networks. Old timers from the area often reminisced about Sunday afternoons lost to games of sandlot baseball and football among white and black neighborhood children. More importantly, ‘connections’ made with the children of the largely immigrant minority that lived in the neighborhood later proved to be instrumental to the success of local battles in the Runyon Height community.

Early residents were active in party politics and often split their party affiliation, much like middle-class suburban blacks do today. By the time the Runyon Heights Democratic Club was formed in June 1933, both the Republican Club of Nepperhan and the Phyllis Wheatley Republican Club had already been established. While early voter participation rates were not available, residents recalled being active participants and the percentage of active registered voters has remained high (Haynes 2001). Residents reported that trips to the local barber or hairdresser might also double as an opportunity to engage in political discussions with fellow residents. Women frequented two locally-owned beauty salons along Saw Mill River and Tuckahoe Roads; men often frequented a small barbershop known as Trent’s in the basement of a local resident’s home. These establishments did more than provide an important personal service; they served as a place where information was exchanged and local opinions shaped. One resident stated it simply, ‘Trent’s, it was a very political atmosphere. You know, when you went in, they talked about what was going on in the community.’

One 31-year-old resident explained how the community uses multiple networks to tap the resource-rich networks within mainstream political institutions, and how National civil rights organizations like the N.A.A.C.P. provided an important extra-communal legal framework for local challenges to discrimination.

What happens is, politicians count every vote, no matter which one it is, and fortunately for us, because of the education of the folks in the neighborhood, this is something that’s been there way before my time. So people are smart enough to be on both sides of the playing field. We have a Republican leader of the Tenth Ward … and he has a lot of networks. And a lot of the folks that live in Runyon Heights either work for the city as employees … so they have a lot of political savvy. They know that you have to show up at the fund raisers, and all that other kind of stuff, and that’s how that works, that people are able to make phone calls and do that … And now it hits them twice, because is this going to be a problem with people of color, is this going to be a problem for the N.A.A.C.P. … or is this a problem in the neighborhood, is this a problem for Runyon Heights? And we know how to use our leverage appropriately to get the things done.

In the early period of Runyon Heights, the church provided the basis for a rich network of community organizations; later it served as a basis for high levels of political involvement. Putnam (2000) argues that ‘faith-based organizations’ are particularly central to building social capital and civic engagement in African American communities (68). But Putnam fails to account for the changing institutional environment in which black social networks emerged in the late Progressive era. The early period of community life was dominated by the kind of institution and culture building characteristic of Gramsci’s war of maneuver leading to the development of rich social networks that served as a source of social control and support for families and community. But as residents found themselves unable to wield influence in the formal social and political arenas, they soon tested a more confrontational civic strategy that resembles Gramsci’s war of position. As we detail below, a conflict over public education in 1928 provided just the context for shifting strategies. The community’s success in this conflict foreshadowed more open political struggles that
how residents used their social capital as a basis for a new, more confrontational style of civic engagement as they shifted to a strategy of war of position.

The Limits of Social Capital as a Basis for Civic Engagement

Although World War II marks the beginning of the democratization of state institutions, which further encouraged minority political engagement and protest, residents had already made a subtle shift, however, testing a strategy of a war of position in the late 1920s; As the first generation of Runyon Heights children reached their teens, efforts were made by the local school board to segregate them in inferior schools, thus limiting the development of human capital across generations.

In 1925, Runyon Heights was 53 percent black and comprised only 369 residents; by 1940 it was more than 72 percent black and was home to some 1,015 people. The growth in population in the general area led to the building of a new high school, Roosevelt High School. While the school was located just one-half mile away from the Runyon Heights community, the Yorkers School Board had planned to bus Runyon children to schools across town. Parents questioned the standards at these alternative schools, which were widely considered less academically oriented, and believed that the all-white policy threatened their children's future mobility. Mothers quickly responded by organizing community residents to petition the Yorkers School Board. Their challenge was based on the grounds that taxes from the Nepperan Valley region, which included the Runyon Heights area, were used in the construction of Roosevelt. Residents understood that their tax obligations entitled them to access to public services. Threatened with legal action, the school board reluctantly withdrew their segregationist plan and permitted local black teens to attend the new high school. As the spouse of one activist-mother recounted, 'The black mothers fought and got their children in the school'.

The Roosevelt affair was the first outside event to trigger a collective political response on the part of community residents; from that point forward, race shaped their collectively defined interests. Emboldened by their successes, residents began shifting to more open and direct challenges to local race subordination. Encouraged by a new anti-discrimination policy in federal contracts during World War Two, residents shifted attention to discrimination in local industry.

Using a strategy not too different from Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH, a group of concerned black citizens went to local industries as representatives of their local Yorkers' communities and petitioned for better hiring practices. Middle-class and working-class blacks organized, taking their message directly to employers. One long-time resident explained:

Not only community people, but they were people from out of the community who were interested in it. But they decided that the community should get busy, because in all of these plants and things people were going to work for defense. And they weren't hiring black people here, you know. So they decided that they would make a survey and a visit to all of these plants. And Mr McRae and Dr Rivers, I think it was, and me, the three of

us went to these various places like Alexander Smith down here. That was a big going factory then. And we went to Phelps Dodge, and we went to Anaconda Wire and Cable, and asked them why they didn't hire blacks ... I didn't go to Otis, but I think they went. I think they went, but I think Otis had one or two black people anyway ... And there was money around, and black people weren't getting any. And so that's why they went into it. We were being called to go fight, well not really to go fight, but to go serve those fighters.

The Depression years had a detrimental impact on the demographic makeup of School 1. In 1938, school district lines were redrawn and School 1 was made into the smallest school zone in Yonkers, destroying the integrated character of the school. Over the next fifteen years, Runyon children were increasingly isolated at School 1, where the quality of education significantly dropped, and white students were relocated to the already predominantly-white Schools #5 and 22 (80 CIV. 6761 L.B.S. Cited in Haynes 2001). Runyon Heights' residents firmly believed that education was the ticket to future middle-class prosperity for their children; after the war, their attention returned to the schools. By 1950, School 1 had become 91 percent black. First and second grades and third and fourth grades were combined into single grades, and the school enrolled a mere 100 students in a facility designed for 240 (80 CIV. 6761 L.B.S.: 274 Cited in Haynes 2001). Once again, residents' experiences with the Yorkers Board of Education helped to reinforce collective solidarity around race, and their collective interests in the financial future of their children prompted their civic engagement. Race subordination linked residents together in a community of common fate.

The community petitioned the Yorkers Board of Education to re-expand the School 1 district lines, effectively reintegrating the school. Integration with whites, while socially desirable for some middle-class blacks, was never the primary goal of Runyon Heights' residents. For them, integration was a method of achieving equal educational opportunity for their children. One woman who was a part of the protest committee reported:

Number 1 had become a nothing. Number 1 had become just a place to put black children. Number 1 had become totally an all-black school. I think they had white teachers there that were pulling in a salary who really had no interest in our children. And they could draw and they could sing, you know, but don't ask them to add anything.

The response of the Yorkers Board of Education to the May 1954 Brown decision by the Supreme Court marks the turning point in the development of social capital resources in the Runyon community. Residents began to use national organizations to fight local battles; the N.A.A.C.P. joined the petitioners in both the Brown case and the Roosevelt High School conflict. Following the precedent of the Brown case, the Board decided to close School 1 and desegregate Schools 5 and 22 by reassigning Runyon Heights' children to them. The era of School 1 as both community resource and substitute Community House had come to an end; Runyon children would henceforth be bussed to other areas. Social capital resources, in the form of ties between children, ties between children and parents, and ties between parents were weakened as children were dispersed across the city.

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12 1975 New York State Senate Minutes, 50th Reg.
In 1956, another issue confronted the collective interests of Runyon residents. The Yonkers City Council proposed building 335 units of low-income public housing in the Runyon Heights, not far from the Homefield border. This was the first in a series of public housing proposals the community would confront over the next forty years. This first project, which called for the building of 335 low-income units in the area, would have transformed the economic character of the community and undermined local efforts to maintain property values, low crime rates, and a sense of community. One former president of the R.H.I.A. summed it up, "This is the reason why you see a Community House. This is the reason why you see us organized now, because we had to get organized. That was it."

The battle over public housing brought the black residents of Runyon Heights into allegiance with the neighboring Homefield community. Both groups objected to the city government’s low-income housing plan as they sought to protect their own class interests. The local N.A.A.C.P. was once again called upon to advocate for Runyon Heights residents, although it was also advocating for low-income housing in Yonkers. Not only had the organization been supported by community residents, many of whom were dues-paying members, but Runyon Heights had also been home to many former and current N.A.A.C.P. leaders. The battle against low-income housing in Runyon Heights placed Homefield residents in indirect alliance with the N.A.A.C.P. What is striking is that after having created and maintained the four-foot reserve strip as an artificial border separating Runyon Heights, the Homefield community now made common cause with their black neighbors. New coalition aside, one crucial difference remained between the motivations of Runyon Heights and Homefield residents: residents of Runyon Heights were not troubled by the fact that most of the low-income residents would be black and Latino. Their motivation for resistance was based on protecting the class composition of the community.

The rejuvenated R.H.I.A. had learned how to broker external resources and community interests by creating a bridge between both local and national organizational networks. Tapping into the resources of the N.A.A.C.P. and mobilizing local dissent around common class interests, residents of Runyon Heights united with the predominantly white Homefield community to defeat the proposal. But city demands for housing led to a compromise, and a smaller 48-unit public housing complex, called Hall Court, was subsequently approved for construction in Runyon Heights and completed in 1962. Insult was added to injury when the old School 1 site was designated as the location for the new project.

Focused on community defense, residents saw the need for another Community House. A number of residents participated in fundraising efforts and the new center was finally dedicated in 1963.13 Born in an era of increased government spending on community service programs, the Community House expanded its programs and services under the auspices of the Runyon Heights Improvement Association. Active participation in the R.H.I.A. helped to maintain community cohesion in an era in which residents faced both the destruction of School 1 and a gradual decline in church attendance by newer residents.

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13 Penny socials and tea parties were held to raise funds for the construction and operation of the center.

As residents became knowledgeable of the institutional environment and the multiple resource networks necessary to defend their collective interests, local ward politics and bridging networks grew in importance. Social clubs and community voluntary associations could not alone defend community interests in the current era, thus residents shifted their focus from service to political advocacy. One young male resident explained how local concerns encouraged residents to split party loyalties and get involved:

The community would survive without the different organizational levels, but they wouldn’t survive if they did not participate politically. If they didn’t participate politically they would get left out, as everyone does when you don’t participate politically. That’s been the general problem for our folks is that they vote and they vote one line. They vote Democratic, but they don’t look at issues. I try to educate people, you don’t have to vote Democratic. You vote for the person that does, that handles your issues best – that supports the things you’re looking to support. And if that person is from the New Zimbabwe Party, then you vote for them ... Political support doesn’t mean you voted for somebody. It meant who you worked for. Because they need foot soldiers, and all that stuff, going out there, priming the pump, talking to people, delivering whatever percentage of votes, because one vote, Nicholas Wascieuco can tell you, he won by twelve votes.

Informal channels were equally important in addressing community concerns. By linking the social networks of local residents to individuals who held positions of power, brokers provided an important access to local resources. As one resident explained, ‘You network, you work for the city, you know the right people, you talk to the right people. And if you do that properly, you’ll get things done, because you’ll be able to pick up the phone and talk to the right person. You see the appropriate person is not always the one that’s in charge. The one that’s appropriate may be the one that’s sitting on the truck.’ Personal ties and residential life in the City of Yonkers was closely linked to a political patronage system that was built into local ward politics. Fortunately for the community, many residents had attended the integrated School 1 and developed friendships with whites whose families were often positioned in local government and city administration. Those ties have proven critical to acquiring public services.

One individual played an especially instrumental role in galvanizing community resources: long-time resident Mr. Milton Holst. Sometimes called the ‘mayor’ by local officials and community residents, Holst is a man who takes pride in knowing his neighborhood and neighbors. He is a man who appears to know everyone when he drives through his neighborhood. Building on the networks he developed at School 1, Holst has since established relationships with individuals throughout the entire city. Following the example set by his parents, Holst became involved in community affairs as a young man. When he was only 25 and still living at home, he volunteered to become Scout Master of local Boy Scout Troop 34. After World War II, he became a city employee. He first became involved in local politics during the early sixties when the R.H.I.A. came into prominence; Holst became a critical link between the local community and public resources. As an adult with his own children, Holst began participating in club house and party politics, attending city hall meetings and escorting local political candidates door to door. He described local district leaders
as the ‘first line of defence’ in local political battles. By 1990, Holst had become the president of the Tenth Ward Republican Club. He was also a major force in the local R.H.I.A., where he took on a number of responsibilities, including president (five occasions) and Action Chairman under at least four presidents. An outgoing and personable individual, ‘Milty,’ as those close to him sometimes call him, helped to build numerous social networks that tapped resources for the community. Currently retired, Milton Holst still takes his responsibility to the community seriously and most days can be found busy at the Community House. One sixty-year-old second generation mother details the importance of the Community House as place of safety for children during the 1960s:

When they were young the parents with young kids used to take turns going over. With Mr. Wilson (former President of R.H.I.A.) they used to have, on weekends, little socials. As long as the parents, someone could be there to supervise. Before that they were in the day camps and things over there. They played on the basketball teams. That was very instrumental in their development too. The center over there, that was sort of a focal point for them and their activities.

Bruce: Did most of the kids in the neighborhood participate?

Yeah, quite a few participated in some way or the other. That was one thing that was good for them. They got a chance to be, with their own, you know, their own peers and things, right in their own community. They didn’t have to go to another area. So from that community center they were able to make a lot of friends, you know. A lot of them are still friends now, after all these years.

Mothers tended to organize the household around their children, and banded together to balance family and career responsibilities. Employed mothers organized day care when their children were young, often sharing duties or employing a local relative. Some stay-at-home moms formally structured their relationships with groups like the Idlers Club, while others relied on the general resources of the local community. One resident, born in 1925, had lived in Runyon Heights since the age of five and attended School 1. After marriage, she lived for a brief time in a housing project on the west side of the city with her husband and six children. In 1961, she moved the family back to Runyon Heights. Following the sudden death of her husband in 1964, she became trained as a dental assistant and returned to the workforce, with the assurance that her children were safe in the neighborhood:

I found that when my husband died and my baby was about two, and my children were all in grammar school or starting to go into junior high school, and I found that here I never worried. I had to go to work then, but I didn’t worry. When I went out of here I never worried that they’d get in to gangs or fighting, because everybody was a community. A community that I knew, you worried about my kids like I worried about yours. Everybody around would look, and if something went wrong they would tell me … Oh, yeah! We were all right here for each other.

Despite our respondent’s rich social networks, her college credentials, and the safety of the community, her children enjoyed far less success; all of her children had attended at least two years of college, but only one had actually graduated. The inability to pass down social status and capital to the next generation remains a major challenge for the black middle class. Small (2004) discusses the importance of generational status in explaining varying levels of civic participation (157, 179).

Throughout the nineteen seventies, eighties, and nineties, the suburban character of the community continued to come under assault from outside forces, and Runyon Heights increasingly took on the characteristics of the defended community (Suttles 1972). Businesses sought development in the area and the city repeatedly proposed building additional low-income housing in the community’s backyard. The R.H.I.A. continued to grow both in membership and importance as older residents successfully mobilized newcomers and developed strategies for defending local interests.

Discussion

The case of Runyon Heights provides strong empirical evidence to refute Putnam’s view that communities need only trust-based social networks to create sufficient amounts of social capital for the good society. Active civic engagement, strong voter turnout, and high levels of social organization did not lead to the prosperous society and government for the residents of Runyon Heights. While the community displayed all of the essential qualities of the ideal civic-minded community, segregation and institutional exclusion limited the operational value of their social capital networks. DeFilippis (2001) argues that Putnam’s position fails to account for differences in power and economic capital in the production of communities. Using levels of “schmoozing” as the foundation for a conception of social capital is limiting because the central issue facing a segregated community is access to power. Prior to Brown, schmoozing with “Coloreds” brought few rewards to white Americans. One local business woman detailed how she hired a white man to negotiate particular issues with clients in her real estate business; she even reported that she purchased a home in Homefield because the seller, seeking vengeance against his neighbor, purposefully sought out a black realtor. Bourdieu suggests that race is a set of social relationships that regulates the distribution of power and status. In Runyon Heights, institutionalized racial boundaries reinforced black isolation while providing differential access to Capital in all of its forms. Emerson (1962) posits that power resides implicitly in the dependency of others. The very nature of segregation instills dependency in the segregated since access to social institutions, such as housing, education, employment, and government, is controlled by the segregator. Putnam’s analysis of community development fails to consider concepts of power-dependent relationships and the differing values of social capital in alienated communities. Despite strong familial and civic ties, residents could not manage the inequities imposed by segregation. Rendered ineffective, as alienation prohibited access to critical social institutions, the social capital of the segregated

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14 We define generational status as a resident’s position in the life course, as well the timing of their cohort’s settlement in the area. Small (2004), however, uses the term ‘generational status’ to refer to resident’s ‘generation of migration’ as discussed by Portes and Rumbaut (2001) (157).
was devalued. The strong ties among Runyon Heights residents were consequently ineffective in negotiating resource-rich white networks; thus their material wealth was always threatened by racial subordination.

While the number and strength of locally-based social clubs and voluntary associations have declined since the first decades, Runyon Heights witnessed a high level of civic engagement during the decades following World War II. And contrary to the expectations of Putnam, one of the more active groups in Runyon Heights during the 1990's was Senior Group 8, a bowling league made up of long-time community residents. Although we did not find competitive bowling leagues for children in Runyon Heights, older residents have continued to be engaged in spirited bowling competition against other senior teams representing other Yonkers communities. The growth in importance of the R.H.I.A demonstrates that social capital (community networks) have changed, rather than simply declined, in the post-Brown era. Residents have shifted network membership from local clubs to more formal political institutions like the R.H.I.A. and supra-community associations like the N.A.A.C.P., which channel social capital towards community defense.

**Conclusion**

The story of Runyon Heights details how racial endogamy shaped the creation of racially defined suburban residential space. Race provided the basis for determining moral value, as well as the unequal distribution of power and resources that were reflected in segregated social and civic institutions. By implementing racially biased policies prior to the Brown decision, federal and local agencies created a unique set of dilemmas for the black middle class. State institutions helped to structure the physical boundaries of community around race and strongly influenced the value of the social capital that developed among black residents. The limited value of residents' social capital is evidenced by their institutional marginality and lack of political influence prior to the Brown decision.

Civic engagement was indeed a precondition for manifesting social capital in Runyon Heights, but it was changes in the post-Brown institutional environment that prompted residents towards a strategy of war of position, redirecting organizational efforts towards formal politics and agitation through the Runyon Heights Improvement Association. What occurred was not an absolute decline in social capital, as Putnam would surmise, but a shift in collective focus towards more formal methods of civic engagement. Neighborhood conditions and external threats redirected the thrust of social organization towards instrumental ends. The Brown ruling had a direct impact on the decision to close School 1 in 1956. The court's recognition of institutional discrimination gave blacks political power and transformed Runyon Heights into a defended community, as residents were able to draw upon the increased value of their social capital and claim a place in the civic arena (Sutters 1972; Haynes 2001). The value of their social capital changed because institutional inclusion reduced the level of social stigma attached to race. Whites recognized this symbolic breakdown in the color bar, and as a result, felt an increased freedom to socialize and network with blacks.

Contrary to the classic description of the defended community (Janowitz 1967; Sutters 1972), Runyon Heights had already experienced high levels of social organization, yet neighborhood conditions and external threats redirected the thrust of social organization towards instrumental ends. The issue of equal rights took on a local dimension as black residents organized, protested and eventually aligned with their white neighbors to protect community interests. As the community united for their white neighbors to protect community interests, the development of light industry in the area and repeated proposals for low-income housing led residents to organize their resource networks more strongly than ever.

Segregation throughout America is characterized by physical, social and psychological boundaries of exclusion. Runyon Heights residents demonstrate, through the use of extensive social networks, how social capital is utilized to transcend group boundaries. These race-based boundaries act to limit black residents' access to social goods. Despite a high degree of civic engagement, Runyon Heights residents became dependent on relationships with dominant groups and their ties to local government. Theoretically, we challenge Putnam's culturalist orientation that social networks carry intrinsic value and provide a case that demonstrates the importance of state institutions in determining the value of a group's social capital. Contrary to Putnam's notion that civic engagement leads to good government, Runyon Heights reveals the 'dark side of social capital' and the importance of state institutions in creating and maintaining race and class inequities.

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Networked Urbanism


Place, Space and Race


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