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Black cultural advancement: racial identity and participation in the arts among the black middle class

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Abstract

While there are well developed theoretical elaborations of the role of consumption in establishing and solidifying the class boundaries of elites, there is less understanding of the ways that elites draw on cultural participation to assert racial and ethnic membership. I address this gap and explore how middle-class blacks experience art patronage as a collective project of black cultural advancement. Drawing on in-depth interviews with middle-class blacks, I document how some middle-class blacks see themselves as uplifting the race by being patrons of black artists and black cultural institutions and by owning black art. Through elaborating how middle-class blacks experience arts participation as a form of racial unity, this paper contributes to a more complete understanding of the role that cultural participation plays in the racial and ethnic identity construction of elites.

Keywords: Black middle class; racial identity; culture; elites; cultural capital; collective identity.

Introduction

In this paper, I depart from the traditional class approach to studying the arts participation of elites and analyse racial identity. Specifically, I investigate how middle-class blacks articulate racial unity through the patronage of black visual art. The emphasis on arts participation as creating and solidifying the class boundaries of elites has left us with little understanding of how the racial and ethnic identities of elites are mobilized and defined through their cultural engagement. Given debates surrounding the salience of race in the lives of the

black middle class (Wilson 1980; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Collins 1997; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Lareau 2003, pp. 240–1; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2003; Lacy 2007; Pattillo 2007), it is important to understand how middle-class blacks assert their racial identity through cultural participation.

To explore how middle-class blacks articulate racial unity through the consumption of black visual art, I draw on in-depth interviews with 103 black middle-class art patrons in the United States. I theoretically elaborate and empirically illustrate how art patronage is experienced by middle-class blacks as a collective project of black cultural advancement. For some middle-class blacks, black progress in the art world is seen as dependent on the collective support of blacks. This ethos of black advancement surrounds black artists, black art consumers, and black arts institutions.

In the next section I outline the literatures that ground the theoretical and empirical contributions of this study. In the following sections, I describe the methods and findings. In the conclusion, I discuss how research on racial unity may also illuminate middle-class blacks' consumption of other black art forms, such as black dance and theatre, as well as cast light on the arts participation of elites in other racial and ethnic groups.

Group boundaries and elite cultural participation

Class membership

There is a long theoretical tradition in the social sciences arguing that the arts participation of elites distinguishes them from other classes.¹ Scholars have argued that the wealthy signal their economic standing by the 'conspicuous consumption' of costly objects (Veblen [1899] 2007); that the middle and upper classes mark their status by an appreciation of the 'high' arts (DiMaggio 1982a, 1982b; Bourdieu 1984; Ostrower 1998; Gans 1999; Ostrower 2002); and that high status groups distinguish themselves with omnivorous tastes, or an appreciation of cultural variety (Peterson and Simkus 1992; Bryson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996). While these theories posit that different forms of cultural participation distinguish elites from other classes, they share the assumption that cultural participation is central for establishing and enacting membership in the elite.

Scholarship that focuses on the black middle class also emphasizes the role of consumption in marking the class boundaries of this group. Classic texts on black life, such as W.E.B. Du Bois's *Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1996) and St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis* (1945), note how the lifestyles of the black middle class signify their class status. In 1957 E. Franklin Frazier published *Black*

Bourgeoisie, one of the most controversial texts addressing black middle-class lifestyles. He describes how middle-class blacks attempt to manage racial stigma by drawing on status symbols that often involve 'a show of wealth' (Frazier [1957] 1997, p. 219).

While Frazier's approach to black middle-class lifestyles has generated criticism and debate since its publication (Teele 2002), a continuing theme in research on black middle-class cultural consumption is that middle-class blacks articulate and define their class standing through their lifestyle (Landry 1987, pp. 158–92; Anderson 1999, pp. 16–17; Pattillo 2007). This scholarship often emphasizes how middle-class blacks believe that they can escape discrimination by signalling their class status through class markers, such as expensive clothing (Anderson 1990, pp. 160–2; Lee 2000, pp. 369–71; Lamont and Molnár 2001; Lacy 2007, pp. 72–113). What is still left largely unexplained is how middle-class blacks draw on cultural participation to assert their membership as black.

Racial membership

While sparse in comparison to literature that addresses black middle-class cultural consumption and class membership, there is a small body of findings that link black middle-class cultural participation to racial boundaries. In their research on the arts participation of blacks and whites, Paul DiMaggio and Francie Ostrower (1990) argue that a taste for 'Afro-American musical forms' allows upwardly mobile blacks to make claims to black membership. In his research on art displayed in homes, David Halle (1993) finds that middle-class blacks connect the African art that they own to their African ancestry. Similarly, in their in-depth interviews with black professionals in the marketing industry, Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár (2001) argue that 'distinctively black practices', such as 'purchasing black artifacts' (p. 40), are used to assert and affirm membership as black. These findings point to the ways that middle-class blacks define their racial belonging through the consumption of 'black' culture.

I build on these studies and elaborate how middle-class blacks enact racial unity through black arts participation.² For middle-class blacks, racial unity has often been understood and experienced as a responsibility to advance the race.³ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we see this with middle-class blacks who aimed to uplift the race through their professional work and volunteerism (Higginbotham 1993; Gaines 1996).⁴ In more recent decades, a sense of duty to advance the group has also been evident among middle-class blacks (Sampson and Milam 1975; Durant and Sparrow 1997; Battle and Wright 2002). For example, research on 'black' gentrification describes how middle-class blacks move into poor, urban

black neighbourhoods with a mission to improve the communities (Taylor 2002; Prince 2004; Hyra 2006; Pattillo 2007). I highlight how middle-class blacks consciously enact racial unity through the patronage of black visual art.

Data and methods

I investigate black art patronage and racial unity among middle-class blacks by drawing on fieldwork in and around New York City and Atlanta, Georgia, which took place in 2003 and 2004. Atlanta and New York offer rich opportunities to study black middle-class art patronage because both cities are important sites for the production and consumption of black art⁵ and they have large black middle-class populations (Williams and Pearson 2002).⁶

Insights about the ways that middle-class blacks articulate racial unity through the patronage of black visual art are based on 103 in-depth interviews with middle-class blacks in 88 households.⁷ To maximize diversity in the sample, I identified participants through a snowball sample that began with multiple starting points.⁸ Initial interviewees were identified from a range of contexts such as cultural and black middle-class organizations.

In-depth interviews focused on the types of arts participation that participants engage in and the subjective meanings that they attach to their participation.⁹ Interviews generally lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and most took place in participants' homes. Interviews were transcribed and systematically content-analysed using a qualitative data analysis program.

Generally, to be considered part of the black middle class an individual has to have a college education, be employed in a white collar job, and/or have a family income that meets a certain income threshold for that time period, such as an income that is twice the poverty level (Pattillo-McCoy 1999). Most individuals in this study have graduate degrees, family incomes greater than or equal to \$100,000, or are employed as professionals, managers or small business owners.

Findings

Artists

It is common for the middle-class blacks I interviewed to describe black arts participation as a way for them to support black artists. Through acts such as buying, donating and exhibiting art by black artists they see themselves as engaging in a collective project not only to ensure that black artists have a market for their art, but also to legitimate their work.

Janet Taite¹⁰ and her partner earn over \$100,000 a year. As she describes, the ‘vast majority’ of the art that she collects is by African American artists. Janet purchases this art, such as the black and white abstract drawing by a black artist that hangs in her living room, at art shows and galleries that focus on African American art. Janet stresses that her effort to search out art by black artists is partly grounded in the difficulties that they face in selling their work:

African American artists need to have support from their own people because they are not well-represented in galleries. They have not been bought by others outside of the community as much as many other artists have been. And that’s certainly changing. Prices are going up and there’s a greater appreciation, as well as more collecting But I think it’s really important for African Americans to support African American artists, because if we don’t buy their work who will?

Like other participants, Janet frames the practice of collecting art by black artists as part of a broader necessity for black collectors to purchase the work of black artists. This is a consideration that some see as born in the reality that being black has limited the opportunities for black artists to fully develop a market for their work.

Historically, racial marginalization has restricted market opportunities for black artists (Bearden and Henderson 1993; Powell 2002). Racial segregation left black artists outside of many galleries and museums and, as an art adviser I talk with notes, ‘the auction houses [still] do not have consistent sales that include African American artists’ work’.¹¹ Participants like Janet emphasize that the challenge that black artists have faced in developing an audience for their art is a collective problem shared by blacks. By purchasing their art, some middle-class blacks see themselves as taking up the cause to address this inequality.

Brian and Cynthia Willis also see themselves as taking part in this cooperative effort to support black artists. The Willises live in a home at the centre of a cul-de-sac in an Atlanta neighbourhood. When Brian first started purchasing art he was not specifically focused on buying art by black artists. Instead, he bought art by black artists as well as artists from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Over the years, as he has learned more about the challenges that black artists face, he has become more directly focused on buying art by them.¹² He says:

It is one of those things where I am consciously trying to buy works by African Americans where before I wasn’t seeking that. I was just trying to get art that I like. I became more conscious of the

challenge of black artists, so as a result I have tried to do something about it.

Later in our interview Brian elaborates on how his perception of racial inequality in the art world shapes his support of black artists:

[I]t is sort of a social consciousness thing because I see how difficult the plight of the artist is. I sort of feel a little consciousness about trying to support black artists in their quests because they have difficulty in being displayed. They have difficulty in finding a larger audience for their work. They have difficulty in getting the recognition that they are talented and deserving. I feel a bit of responsibility to try and do something if I can.

Brian shows me a black and white drawing depicting two black baseball players which he bought from a black art student. He intends to purchase more art by this young artist in the future. 'He is really good', Brian says.

In fact, my intent is to try and follow him and see where his career goes and to try to support him where I can. I have just made a mental note that I will try to seek his work if he is out there. Hopefully, what I will be able to do is to also find other black artists who are like him.

Cynthia adds that art by black artists is also undervalued:

For collectors, it is a great bargain. But for artists it is not. I mean how many really super star black artists are there? That is unfortunate because I think the work deserves it. Some of the work doesn't, but a lot of the work does deserve that status.

Cynthia's concern with the status of black artists was echoed by many of the middle-class blacks I met. There is an interdependent relationship between the audience for art and the reputation of artists, and several participants reveal that they direct their art patronage towards valorizing art by black artists. Vincent Foster is a professor who has directed his art collecting towards legitimating black art for decades.

When Vincent and I meet one sunny afternoon, he talks passionately about his collection and the position of African American artists within the broader art world. Vincent started collecting African American art in the 1960s. At that time he noticed the lack of inclusion of African American artists in the canon and became concerned that the contribution of these artists would be forgotten:

I looked around and I saw gaps in the museum world. They weren't using funds for their permanent acquisitions each year to collect work by artists of color, by African American artists. In the gallery world, once in a while maybe every four or five years, they might get a superstar among the blacks and sell out. But they didn't always keep them as part of their stable. So I said some of these people have got to be of museum quality. What I wanted to do then was to set out to collect, although not completely African American art, primarily African American art, to keep it from being lost to the art world once things changed and that was the start of my initial collecting.

Vincent, like others I talked with, views valorization of art by black artists as a community undertaking. Artistic valorization refers to a process of canonization that has symbolic and institutional dimensions (Baumann 2007).¹³ Participants like Vincent want black art to be accepted as valuable, and to be objectively positioned in valued spaces, such as exhibited in prestigious museums and galleries.

Vincent's concern for the legitimization of art by black artists was born in the 1960s and coincided with burgeoning national concerns for racial equality and black inclusion. In this case, inclusion is conceptualized as recognition of art by at least some black artists as valuable and worthy additions to the artistic canon. Over the decades, Vincent has collected art by African American artists such as Elizabeth Catlett and Jacob Lawrence, who he believes produce museum quality work. During the time period that Vincent has been collecting, black artists have become increasingly valorized, partly as a result of patronage practices such as collecting and ultimately donating the art.

Recently, Vincent donated works from his collection to a museum. He believes that his donation is having a significant impact on the inclusion and recognition of African American artists:

This has been beneficial for the artists who have seen their work appreciate and are beginning to see museums acquire works for their collections. So I feel good about it. They are also seeing major collectors who are white begin to include African American artists in their collections. The same thing is happening with the corporate collections. So I think to some extent, what I have tried to do is influence some of that taking place.

Jack Davis, a lawyer in his late fifties, is also participating in the effort to increase recognition for African American artists. Jack became passionate about collecting art by black artists in the 1980s after befriending a colleague who works in the arts. Over the years, Jack developed his collection with the assistance of a well known connoisseur

in the field, and he has served as chair on the board of a black art museum. When I asked Jack about the personal significance of his collection, he replied:

I viewed it as a statement that I was making. I wanted to collect and convey not just to the artists themselves, but to the entire community a statement about this is what African American artists are about. So in some sense, it was a personal statement – a personal statement about the quality of art that was being created and also about the importance of supporting those artists.

Like Vincent, Jack's collection of African American art includes original art and limited edition prints by black artists, such as Jacob Lawrence and Henry Ossawa Tanner. He has tried to increase the status of this art by including it in exhibitions. In a small room that overlooks the backyard, a poster from an exhibit of his art collection is hanging on the wall. A few years ago, Jack and his wife Lola exhibited several works from their collection of African American art at an art show. Jack thought that, 'it was an opportunity to acquaint the community with the visual arts contribution of African Americans'. He was also able to display the art of a less well known African American artist whose work is at the centre of his collection:

He's never had a really large collection of his work. Although he's had exhibits, they've been relatively small. So it was the first time that he had a really large exhibit of his works. And so there were actually two galleries. One was all of the other art, and another gallery was devoted specifically to [his] art.

Other interviewees who donate and exhibit art by black artists from their collections also see themselves as engaging in a shared effort to valorize art by black artists. Lionel Stark employs another strategy to valorize art by black artists – serving on arts boards at majority museums. Lionel is in his early forties and his wife Jessica is in her late thirties. Both Lionel and his wife have master's degrees. There is little space on their walls that does not display abstract and figurative art by black artists.

Lionel reflects on how being a board member at a majority arts institution enables him to help black artists receive recognition. 'The board is what you want because if you get on the board, the board makes the decisions', he says. Within arts institutions board members wield significant influence helping to make decisions about what artists are collected, exhibited, and featured in other ways. In

his role as a board member Lionel has helped black artists receive fellowships and other honours:

It is about getting in a position where you can make decisions. And when you make decisions then [those] who can call the shots, they decide what goes in the museum and who is up there. It is unfortunate that we don't have a lot of people in that capacity.

Other interviewees also see their membership on boards or in support groups at majority arts institutions as an opportunity to promote black artists. Given the small number of blacks on these boards (Ostrower 2002), some participants view this as a particularly important role for them to play.

The support of black artists is seen by many middle-class blacks I talked with as a collective black endeavour. The effort by middle-class blacks to support black artists has deep historical roots (Fleming and Roses 2007). For example, noted scholar Alain Locke used his scholarship to promote the valorization of black artists during the Harlem Renaissance, and W.E.B. Du Bois encouraged patronage of black artists and created opportunities for black artists to disseminate their art.¹⁴ Today, some middle-class blacks continue this effort. This concern for black cultural advancement is also extended by some participants to black art consumers.

Consumers

Fundamental to the belief that blacks are a cohesive group is the idea that a shared culture unites them. Black visual art is seen as a form of culture that binds blacks together. It was common for the middle-class blacks I talked with to describe a link between black people and black visual art. Participants often used phrases such as 'our culture' and 'our art' to refer to black art. This sense of connection extends to black ownership of black art.

Nancy and Bill Cunningham are concerned with black ownership of black art. Bill tells me:

[W]e see so much of our art in the hands of people other than African Americans and that is how it gets locked into arenas where we don't have access. That is why it is so important to us to collect the very best of those individuals who are out there that we are able to.

Recently, the couple bought a painting by a respected black artist and told me that part of the significance of their purchase is that it 'is staying in the hands of black people'. Middle-class blacks like the

Cunninghams understand and experience black art ownership within a framework of cultural equity (DiMaggio and Useem 1980) and cultural property.¹⁵ Specifically, they are concerned with blacks having the opportunity to own black art. While many participants, including the Cunninghams, encourage and engage in activities that promote the appreciation and collection of black art by a racially and ethnically diverse public, some also believe that blacks should participate in the ownership of black art. They often note that the latter is an increasingly elusive goal.

Like all art, purchasing black art requires economic resources, and as a group blacks have disproportionately fewer economic resources than whites (Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Shapiro 2004). This means that art by black artists who are already recognized or who are becoming valorized is less accessible to many blacks. This fact is illustrated by Alvin Hayes, a New Yorker who earns a six-figure salary. Black art is selling at 'prices [where] black people can't buy', he tells me. This includes even middle-class blacks like himself. 'I would love to own a Kara Walker', he says. 'But I don't have the money.'

Thus, while some of the middle-class blacks I interviewed desire black ownership of black art and see themselves as participating in this endeavour, they approach their purchases of black art strategically. They increase their access by purchasing limited edition prints instead of original art, and buying smaller pieces instead of larger works.¹⁶ Another important strategy that some use is timing, and buying art before the artists become widely recognized.

The Cunninghams are starting to collect work by a black abstract expressionist who is increasingly becoming recognized. They note that if blacks want to own art by this artist, time is of the essence. Bill says:

We don't want it to be another Romare Bearden story or Jacob Lawrence story where the moment you turn around it is out of control, out of our hands and we are out of the loop of the major pieces

Collector Jay Goodwin describes what he sees as blacks' loss of access to some black vernacular art:

[I]f we think it's important to us then we should . . . be willing to invest in it. A good example of that is African-American quilts, African-American self-taught art. It's been available in our community forever. It's only been in the last 15 or 20 years that Americans of European descent have decided that there's value in it, and they've come and taken much of the best out of our community. And now we will decide that we want it after they have already come in.

During some historical periods, vernacular art forms, such as quilts, were widely consumed by blacks (Wardlaw 2004, pp. 25–6). These art forms have been growing in popularity within the world of fine art. Artists, such as the Quilters of Gee’s Bend, have shows in prestigious museums like the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Beardsley *et al.* 2002).

Jay expresses a sentiment shared by some other participants: if blacks do not place value on black art, ultimately non-blacks will, and blacks will have fewer opportunities to own it. As Johnson Hayes, a young professional who was educated at a prestigious West Coast university, notes, ‘If we don’t deem it important then shame on us because someone else is going to buy it [and] own it . . .’ Johnson and Jay describe black visual art as an important part of the cultural heritage of blacks and they feel that it is at risk of being lost to the group. In this way, they see black art as a proprietary resource which blacks should participate in the control of.¹⁷

Black ownership of black art is understood by some participants as a form of black cultural advancement. In the next section, we will see how this ethos extends to black art organizations.

Organizations

Like black artists, some participants direct their arts participation towards helping to ensure that there is a market for the goods and services that black cultural institutions provide. There is also a related concern for the financial viability of these organizations.

Anne Stephens, an Ivy League trained attorney, and her husband Robert, a banker, live in Manhattan. I talked with Anne in February 2004, just after she had attended the annual National Black Fine Arts Show in New York. ‘This is my second year going’, Anne said. This year she went with her mother and a girlfriend. Last year she went for the first time. ‘I heard so much about it that I figured I should go. [I thought that] I would probably have fun’, she says,

But I also feel that it’s important that if we’re going to have this [National] Black Fine Arts Show, there should be black people there. I just feel that it would be a shame if there weren’t. That’s not to say that – I mean it was packed with black people. So it wasn’t like it was in danger of not being supported by us. It was packed by people of color. I just feel like it’s important.

The National Black Fine Arts Show, like other black art shows, is dedicated to showcasing black art. Many participants attend and purchase art from this and other art shows. Some of the older participants attended and bought art from the Atlanta University

Annuals before the exhibition ended in the 1970s. Middle-class blacks like Anne feel that it is important that these shows have audiences and that blacks 'support' them.

In helping to advance black cultural institutions, some participants are also concerned with helping them to become financially viable. One way that they help to infuse these institutions with financial resources is through special fundraising events where cultural institutions sell or auction art. Another common way that they help to raise money is by attending galas.

Lynn Michaels, who works in the arts, tells me about one event for a black museum in New York. 'It's the biggest event of the year for African Americans in New York City', she says. 'It's a very, very, very close-knit group of people. All of African American affluent New York is there.' In recent years the gala has raised over one million dollars.

Black-owned organizations

Institutions that focus on black art can be distinguished by whether or not they are owned or operated by blacks. Some participants are particularly concerned with the well-being of black visual arts institutions that are black-owned or -operated.

Rosalyn Turner is a retired executive. She lives in a New York brownstone with an interior that is accented by dark mahogany wood. Several pieces of art in her home, by black artists such as Romare Bearden, Beauford Delaney and Charles Alston, were purchased from black-owned galleries. Over the years Rosalyn has developed close relationships with black art dealers in New York. She purchases art from them because they specialize in her passion, African American art. She also recognizes the significance that they are black gallery owners. 'I think African American dealers are important', she tells me.

Rosalyn also regularly purchased prints from the workshop of a black printmaker when his institution faced financial difficulties. She shows me a print that she purchased as part of a fundraiser. 'I got that when there was a fundraiser. It got to a point where he was always in danger of losing the printmaking workshop and he would fundraise', she tells me.

Anne, the attorney, describes her desire to buy art from a black-owned gallery in the future. 'One day I would like to go to a gallery that's owned by a black person and buy an original piece of art by a black person', she tells me. 'I just think it's important that in general we support people who have businesses. That's how we're all going to do better – If I have some funds and then buy art from a black gallery owner.'

Susanna and Al Franklin also seek to patronize black-owned galleries. The Franklins are in their early forties and both work in business. They are passionate patrons of African American art and they are on the boards of black cultural institutions. They purchase art by blacks at galleries and art fairs across the nation. There are white gallery owners who the couple have developed close relationships with and purchased several pieces of art from. Al points out one piece to me as we talk. 'It's right around the corner. It's in the front of the house', he says.

While the Franklins buy art from any gallery that has been 'supportive of African American art and artists', they also have a particular concern with the growth of black-owned galleries. 'I believe in trading with other brothers and sisters', Al says. Susanna elaborates:

[I]f they have a piece that you want, then why not go to the black gallery? That should be your first choice because if you don't support them then who will? If we don't, then who will? It gets back to who has capital, who has influence? Just think if all of those black folks who were collectors decided one year to support a particular gallery. How phenomenal that would be. It would just be amazing.

The Franklins' and Anne's interest in buying goods from black businesses has a long history. In *Black Metropolis*, St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton describe the 'double-duty dollar' doctrine promoted during the 1930s and 1940s in Chicago. This doctrine argued that by buying goods from black businesses black patrons were both 'purchasing a commodity and "advancing the race"' (Drake and Cayton 1945, p. 431). Some participants apply this view to visual arts institutions.

Middle-class blacks like Anne, Rosalyn and the Franklins make a distinction between the advancement of all black cultural institutions and those that are specifically owned or operated by blacks. To them, a common black purpose is to not only have cultural institutions that focus on black culture flourish, but also to specifically help those that are owned or operated by blacks.

Conclusion

This paper investigates how middle-class blacks articulate racial unity through their patronage of black art. Many participants understand and experience art patronage as a form of black cultural advancement where they are uplifting the race by furthering the success of black artists and black cultural institutions, and contributing to black ownership of black art. By elaborating how racial unity is articulated

by middle-class blacks through black arts participation, this paper builds on the sparse body of findings showing that middle-class blacks cultivate black identities by consuming black culture.

These findings suggest that the emphasis on cultural participation as establishing and maintaining the class boundaries of elites is insufficient to fully understand the role of arts participation in creating and solidifying the group boundaries of elites. In the case of the black middle class, researchers should investigate how middle-class blacks articulate racial unity through other forms of black arts participation. There are other genres of arts participation that can be defined as 'black'. For example, in the world of dance and theatre there are arts organization that draw on the African American experience in their productions and disproportionately employ black artists. Middle-class blacks may experience their attendance at black performing arts activities and serving on the boards of black performing arts institutions as uplifting the group.

Future research should also explore the extent to which a theoretical model of racial unity and cultural consumption that is based on the black middle class is applicable to elites in other racial and ethnic minority groups. For middle-class blacks, an outlook of racial advancement has characterized how they have experienced and understood racial unity (Du Bois [1903] 1996; Sampson and Milam 1975; Higginbotham 1993; Gaines 1996; Durant and Sparrow 1997; Battle and Wright 2002). Whether or not elites in other racial and ethnic minority groups approach the consumption of art associated with their racial and ethnic groups as a form of racial and ethnic advancement will depend on the degree to which they more generally feel a responsibility to uplift the group. As researchers continue to investigate the role of cultural participation in defining the group boundaries of elites, it will be necessary to investigate in more detail how participation in the arts is used to construct racial and ethnic unity and other dimensions of racial and ethnic identity.

Notes

1. This approach sees culture as playing an important role in the social and symbolic boundaries that elites draw around themselves (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992).
2. This paper also builds on the broader literature on race and symbolic boundaries. This literature explores the parameters of inclusion and exclusion for racial membership (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Fleming 2005). I define *black arts participation* as engaging in activities that involve black art, and *black art* as art that is by black artists or about black people.
3. For broader discussions of racial unity and how blacks see their fates as linked, see Dawson (1994) and Bobo, Dawson and Johnson (2001).
4. Also see W.E.B. Du Bois's ([1903] 1996) essay, 'The talented tenth', where he encouraged highly educated blacks to use their talents to 'save' the race.

5. As a centre for visual art, New York City houses some of the world's leading black galleries, museums and art fairs. Similarly, Atlanta hosts one of the largest black art fairs in the nation, the National Black Arts Festival, as well as its accompanying fine arts show, Emerge.
6. Atlanta and New York are also cities with relatively large black populations. While in 2000 blacks made up about 12 per cent of the population of the United States, they comprised around 26 per cent of the population of New York and 61 per cent of the population of Atlanta (US Bureau of the Census 2000a, 2000b).
7. The conceptual elaborations and empirical illustrations in this paper serve to contribute to a richer theoretical understanding of how middle-class blacks enact racial unity through black arts participation. It should be noted that within this sample participants vary in their understanding of black art patronage as linked to racial unity. It is also the case that racial unity is not the only meaning that they attach to black arts participation.
8. The sample includes a wide range of demographic variation. About half live in the Atlanta metropolitan area, while the other half live in the New York metropolitan area. There are slightly more women than men in the sample, and participants range in age from their twenties to their seventies. There is also variation in participants' involvement in black art. For example, some participants seriously collect black art, regularly attend black art events, and voraciously read black art history texts, while other participants own just a few pieces of black art, and less regularly attend black arts events and read black art history literature. Across these categories, participants describe black art patronage as tied to a sense of black unity.
9. The middle-class blacks I interviewed have cosmopolitan artistic tastes that are racially and ethnically diverse. I explore how these middle-class blacks articulate racial unity through the decidedly black dimension of their art patronage.
10. I use pseudonyms to refer to participants. In some cases, the occupations of participants are replaced with occupations that require similar levels of education, and the names of artists in their collections are replaced with comparable artists.
11. Recent developments in the art world demonstrate a widening market for black art. For example, in 2007 Swann Auction Galleries in New York opened a department of African American art.
12. As participants become more involved in the practice of consuming black art they can become more knowledgeable about the challenges that black artists have faced in the art world. For example, this is a topic that is often broached in black art history texts and in discussions about black artists at black arts shows. Some participants also observe the challenges that black artists face during their own interactions at galleries and museums.
13. Several black art forms such as jazz and black literature have become legitimized over time (Corse and Griffin 1997; Lopes 2002; Gray 2005, pp. 32–51). Scholars have also examined how African art has undergone this process (Zolberg 1997, pp. 53–70; Rawlings 2001).
14. For example, in 'The Negro's contribution to American art and literature', Alain Locke (1928) outlines the influence that black artists have had on American culture. For a discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois's effort to support black artists, see *Art in Crisis: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Kirschke 2007).
15. Native American art has also been appropriated as a proprietary resource (Brown 2003).
16. Prices are often higher for original art works and for larger pieces. Established artists also command higher prices for their work (Velthuis 2005, pp. 124–5).
17. Blacks have also expressed concern over the ownership of other black art forms such as jazz and hip hop. For a broader discussion of the control of black culture see (Greene and Jones 2003).

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