



BLACK PICKET FENCES

*Privilege & Peril among
the Black Middle Class*

MARY PATTILLO

*With a new Foreword
by Annette Lareau*

SECOND EDITION

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The University of Chicago Press
Chicago and London

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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637

The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

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Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-02119-5 (paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-02122-5 (e-book)

DOI: 10.7208/chicago/9780226021225.001.001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pattillo, Mary E.

Black picket fences : privilege and peril among the black middle class / Mary Pattillo. — Second edition.

pages. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-226-02119-5 (pbk. : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-226-02122-5

(e-book) 1. African Americans—Illinois—Chicago—Social conditions. 2. African American youth—Illinois—Chicago—Social conditions. 3. African Americans—Illinois—Chicago—Economic conditions. 4. Middle class—Illinois—Chicago. 5. Chicago (Ill.)—Social conditions. 6. Chicago (Ill.)—Race relations. I. Title.

F548.9.N4P38 2013

305.896'073077311—dc23

2013005615

☞ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Black Picket Fences

To Quentin, Michael, and T. A.

FOREWORD

Given the preoccupation of America with the failings of the poor, social science researchers rarely focus on the middle class. This problem is particularly true of the African American middle class. Originally published in 1999, *Black Picket Fences* offered a fine analysis of a (lower) middle-class neighborhood in Chicago, which Mary Pattillo calls "Groveland." Not only did *Black Picket Fences* receive positive reviews and scholarly awards, but the book has also been influential in social science and policy debates.

Now, a decade later, Pattillo has returned to Groveland. She offers a lucid analysis of the changes that have unfolded over time in this Chicago neighborhood. Her research for this second edition included carrying out in-depth interviews with some of the people she studied in the early 1990s, reviewing countless local documents, and conducting extensive research on changes in the experience of the black middle class in this city and in America. Pattillo enters a conversation, begun by William Julius Wilson, Elijah Anderson, and others, about the role of the black middle class in the city, and the dynamic intermixing of "decent" and "street" folks in the same set of square city blocks.

The first edition of *Black Picket Fences*, and the follow-up, reveal a paradox. On the one hand, the black middle-class families in her study, and across the country, have advantages over white and black low-income families. They own houses; they do not rent. They have often gone to college; they are not high school dropouts. They are much more likely to have stable jobs; they are less likely to be unemployed. Their incomes are above that of many whites; they are not part of the one-quarter of African Americans living below the official poverty line (230, 260). Hence, her study reveals a group of Americans with *privilege*.

On the other hand, the original book and the follow-up also reveal significant challenges. On almost every significant measure, members of the African American middle class fare worse than do comparable whites, and often worse than low-income whites. African Americans live

in neighborhoods with many more poor people than do whites. African Americans are also less likely to be able to keep their children in the middle class. For example, over one-half of African Americans who come from middle-income families experience downward mobility: they fall below their parents' income as adults. This pattern, however, is true for only about one-third of middle-income whites. And African American extended families are much more likely to have a relative who is poor than are white families. The unemployment rate of African Americans is about twice that of whites. Private school enrollment rates are lower for blacks than whites. Black middle-class families are more likely to be victims of crime—blacks with incomes “over \$75,000 are more likely to get their cars stolen than whites in families earning less than \$7,500” (242). Neighborhoods remain heavily racially segregated; and black neighborhoods are more likely to have a lot of poor people in them than white neighborhoods, and high-poverty neighborhoods are found to have many woes, including high crime rates, particularly homicide rates, boarded-up buildings, inferior schools, and limited availability of fresh vegetables and other groceries. Thus, her study of the black middle class also shows significant *peril*.

Not only are these themes true for the individuals in her study, but she found a similar juxtaposition between privilege and peril in the neighborhood of Groveland both at the time of the original study and more recently. On the one hand, unlike blocks of desolation that characterize many cities, she finds “neat bungalow houses” in this 96-percent black neighborhood with lush, trim green lawns, fashionable cars, and clean streets. The value of homes increased over time. New businesses have moved into the area. A bustling youth summer camp offers an array of activities. There is a new library branch. The number of people in the neighborhood who have a college degree grew. Hence, in the ensuing years since Pattillo's original research the neighborhood did not stand still. Instead, the neighborhood remained stable in key ways and, in other ways, thrived.

On the other hand, the proportion of families living below the poverty line in Groveland increased. The unemployment rate also went up in the last decade. The amount of rental housing grew significantly, particularly the number of government-subsidized housing units for poor people. People she spoke with were worried the neighborhood was going downhill. As Pattillo writes, “This position of being ‘more advantaged than other predominantly black neighborhoods but less advantaged than white neighborhoods’ is the recurring theme of this book” (240–241).

As Pattillo develops her analysis of the experience of the black middle

class, I found three themes in the original book and the follow-up to be particularly revealing. First, *Black Picket Fences* helps us develop a language of how social class shapes daily life—a language that has been underdeveloped in America. Since the publication of Pattillo's book, others have built on her work to develop our knowledge further. For example, Karyn Lacy's book, *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) contrasts the experiences of black middle-class families in the Washington, DC, area. Some families choose to live in the predominantly black middle-class communities of Prince George's County, but then send their children to private school. Others, however, moved to the predominantly white suburbs of Virginia, where the schools have a strong reputation. These black middle-class parents worked hard to supplement their children's lives by making sure that they take part in social groups with other African American children. Karyn Lacy has also undertaken a study of the exclusive African American organization for children called Jack and Jill. This class variation among black families was also highlighted in my book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). *Unequal Childhoods* used ethnographic methods to show how African American and white middle-class families raised their children via "concerted cultivation," where they enrolled their children in organized activities (rather than have them watch television or play with their cousins). The middle-class parents also reasoned with the children (answering questions with questions), rather than issuing directives. Also, while the working-class and poor parents depended on educators, doctors, and other professionals to provide services to their children, middle-class African American and white parents closely supervised the actions of professionals. I found, of course, that African Americans lived in predominantly black neighborhoods, attended predominantly black churches, and experienced racial insults in integrated public spaces, but in terms of child rearing, the middle-class white and black families had a great deal in common, while there was a wide divergence between middle-class African American families on the one hand and working-class and poor African American and white families on the other. This divergence also was reaffirmed when I did a follow-up study of these families a decade later. These studies highlight the heterogeneity by social class of African Americans. Recently, Jody Agius Vallejo has highlighted the diversity of Mexican-American families with her book, *Barrios to Burbs: The Making of the Mexican-American Middle Class* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

But the class diversity of black families should not blind us to the

enduring power of race in residential neighborhoods, which is a second very important contribution of *Black Picket Fences*. Indeed, Pattillo's book also helps us think more about the *black* middle class. Other work has highlighted that white Americans are particularly averse to living in neighborhoods with significant numbers of black residents. Thus, many researchers, including Douglas Massey, Lincoln Quillian, and Robert Sampson, have documented that many African Americans and black Hispanics live in neighborhoods that are almost entirely black. As Pattillo notes, even high-income blacks live with and near poor African American residents, much more so than high-income whites. Also, once neighborhoods become black, it is rare for them to change over. Michael Bader shows that in the few instances when neighborhood change happens, it is because Hispanics move into black neighborhoods. Then, and only then, after Hispanics establish a presence in the neighborhood, do whites occasionally enter such neighborhoods. Whites are even more likely to live around other whites than blacks are to live with blacks, and it is rare for whites to move into racially diverse areas. Many factors play a role, but the significance of race in residential patterns is clear. As a result, blacks tend to live in more economically diverse neighborhoods than do whites.

One of the most powerful parts of *Black Picket Fences* is how it reveals the coexistence of middle-class black families with poor families in Groveland. Middle-class adults are aware of the drug dealing and gang activities in the neighborhood, but they also have personal relationships with individuals involved in these activities. They appreciate the contributions the gangs make to the neighborhood, including providing food for neighborhood block parties or security for neighborhood events. Pattillo shows that the middle-class black families in her study are not naive; they know about the activities that are happening around them. But the families also adapt to the neighborhood reality in order to live peacefully in Groveland.

Third, in addition to contributing to the discussions of class and race in America, *Black Picket Fences* reminds us of the importance of place. The book is part of a rich history of studies of neighborhoods in Chicago. Over one hundred years ago social scientists turned their eyes to the city of Chicago and created a set of influential studies, from a focus on Chicago's Polish immigrants to rich studies of the Gold Coast. This tradition of studies of daily life in Chicago continues to this day, from studies of blues clubs in David Grazian's *Blue Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) to studies of how low-income women learn to distrust welfare case workers, employers, and boyfriends in Judith Levine's *Ain't No Trust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

ing). Robert Sampson's work, especially his recent book *Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), provides the definitive assessment of the variation in neighborhoods in Chicago and the impact of neighborhoods on social outcomes. As he shows, neighborhoods matter.

And, as Pattillo shows us, individuals are rooted in place. She reports that over 60 percent of people living in Groveland in 2010 had moved there before 1999; thus, finding the respondents for the follow-up generally went smoothly. But a number of the young people had moved out of the neighborhood. As these young people grew up and changed, what they wanted from the neighborhood changed. Although involving schools rather than city neighborhoods, Amy Stuart Wells found a similar pattern in her interviews with parents who had attended city desegregated schools (graduating in 1980). Her book, *Both Sides Now* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), reveals that these graduates reported, two decades later, many positive benefits from their high school experiences, including in their friendships, work skills, and life attitudes. But these adults also are not keen to have their children enter desegregated schools in their neighborhoods; they fear the challenges the children would face. So, too, Pattillo shows in her follow-up that the young people who grew up in Groveland are worried about bringing their children to the parks in the neighborhood. Spider Waters grew up going to Groveland Park, but he refused to take his eleven-year-old son Payton there; he preferred to take him to a location where he thought there would be zero risk of violence. The people in *Black Picket Fences* insist that they were fine growing up there, but they worry about having their children take part in neighborhood life in Groveland.

Americans believe in the promise of opportunity. Across the country, people focus on individuals and families. But one of the most important contributions of sociology is to show us how individuals' life chances are *socially structured*. Institutions guide and shape our life options. Groups of people have different life chances. In her fine book, Pattillo highlights a series of paradoxes: of the power and limits of class, of privilege and peril, and of continuity and change. With her work, she reminds us to situate individuals in a geographic context. She shows us that the context is different for black and white middle-class Americans. But she also shows that black Americans are a diverse group. The popular and scholarly conversation in America assumes that when we think and talk about blacks, we are talking about the poor. With her focus on the black middle class, Pattillo helps us broaden our vision of America.

Annette Lareau
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Perhaps the most common advice given to students applying to graduate school is: do not choose a graduate program on the basis of one (and only one) professor with whom you would like to work. There is no guarantee that that person will stay for the duration of your graduate career. Even though I now give that advice to undergraduates inquiring about graduate programs, I do not at all regret the decision I made to attend the University of Chicago, with the specific intent to work with William Julius Wilson. Ultimately, Wilson did leave Chicago for Harvard late in my graduate years, but not before I had benefited from his intellectual and professional guidance. When Wilson left, he admonished his students not to simply continue research within the paradigm he has worked to establish, but to add to that body of knowledge, and, indeed, to challenge it. This has been my goal in *Black Picket Fences*.

Wilson provided the resources and the stimulating intellectual environment for me to grow as a social scientist, but—as I believe many scholars feel—I have been a sociologist most of my life. Early in graduate school, I visited Wilson's office and asked for work. He asked about my interests, and I told him of my experience growing up black and middle class in Milwaukee, and the variety of paths that my peers had taken. Of my group of neighborhood and school friends, some had children young, were sporadically employed, or were lured into the drug trade, while others had gone to college, or worked steady jobs and earned enough to start a family. We started pretty much at the same place, but we ended up running the full gamut of outcomes. Some now make six figures—and others are six feet under. I wanted to understand these divergences. My sociological interests were quite personal in that I myself had lost friends and acquaintances both literally in death, and figuratively in that our paths drifted so far apart that there just wasn't much to talk about anymore. Of course, no one

remains lifetime friends with all of their childhood or teenage cronies, but I felt there was a story to be told about black middle-class kids like my friends, a story that was not simply about growing apart.

So, in a strange way, I am grateful and owe much to the people I grew up with in Milwaukee—around Roosevelt, Capital, Atkinson, Hampton, and Sherman Park; at St. Agnes, Whitefish Bay, Washington, Dominican, King, Nicolet, Messmer, and Vincent; and in 2-7, 2-4, drill teams and skating crews, Warning League, Unity in the Community, CYO, and Jack and Jill. These insider references translate to mean that we came from stable, but not “ritzy,” black middle-class neighborhoods; we went to public, private, and Catholic schools; and we belonged to gangs and gospel choirs. In doing the research for this book I learned that our very local experiences were rooted in broad processes that put us where we lived, affected our choice of schools, and influenced the groups we joined.

I began this project working for Bill Wilson and Richard Taub on the Comparative Neighborhood Study (CNS), which was funded by grants from the Ford, MacArthur, and Rockefeller foundations and perfectly matched my interests because it focused on working- and middle-class neighborhoods. My fellow researchers on the CNS team—Reuben May, Jolyon Wurr, Chenoa Flippen, Maria Kefalas, Patrick Carr, Jennifer Johnson, Jennifer Pashup-Graham, and Erin Augis—were great people with whom to learn how to be an ethnographer, to argue over the particulars of social organization, or to compare findings from our respective sites. While I make only a few explicit comparisons to other neighborhoods in this book, I thank Wilson and Taub for allowing us full use of the CNS data.

I could not have finished graduate school in such fine mental health if it were not for the Center for the Study of Urban Inequality. Aside from the stimulating research and educational functions of the Center, it provided a space for graduate students and friends to work and play in. Lunchtime will never be the same without the regulars at the Center, and my friends from graduate school and beyond—the CNS team, Ray Reagans, Sandra Smith, Mignon Moore, Lori Hill, Jeff Morenoff, Pam Cook, Sarita Gregory, Sudhir Venkatesh, Kim Alkins, Alford Young, and Carla O'Connor. The Center's associate director, Jim Quane, blessed us with his on-target professional advice, Irish humor, knowledge of Chicago eateries, great wardrobe, and cool presence all around.

In writing, I benefited from the always practical and insightful sug-

gestions of Christopher Jencks, who challenged me to write an engaging ethnographic narrative. Richard Taub's "but, what about . . ." questions made me consider other angles and interpretations, or strengthen my original assertions, both of which improved my arguments. Sheri Johnson was most honest in telling me what was right and what was wrong in my analysis, and giving comparative examples from her own black middle-class neighborhood. Robert Sampson's stamp is on this book by way of the classes I took with him and his own research on neighborhoods and crime. And again, Wilson's positive encouragement and reassurance that what I was doing was worthwhile gave me much-needed inspiration.

Throughout the writing of the dissertation and the book, the Internet made it possible to stay in touch with some old and many new friends. Our black (upper-) middle-class cybergroup—Mom, Sheri, Nikki, Adrienne, Peggy, Tommie, Ray, Reuben, Shelby, Jennifer, Cathy, and Michael—and many other on-line debates with Bakari Kitwana, have been the best place to shop fledgling interpretations of the data, get feedback on black culture, or have candid "conversations" about black poverty.

After I left Chicago, I was quite fortunate to land at the University of Michigan, where a Ford Foundation postdoctoral fellowship allowed me the freedom and time to turn a young dissertation into a mature book. I could not have had a better boss and mentor than Sheldon Danziger, director of the Poverty Research and Training Center. He was more than generous with his time, his knowledge, his contacts, his books, and (as all of his students know) his editorial red pen. At the Poverty Center, he assembled an interdisciplinary group of academics and researchers that made for the perfect balance of scholarship and socializing. Special thanks to Mary Corcoran and Colleen Heflin, who helped me test the waters of quantitative research. Outside of the Poverty Center, Geoffrey Ward, Tyrone Forman, and the members of Academics for Affirmative Action and Social Justice added stimulating and grounded discussion and debate to my intellectual stint at Michigan.

At Northwestern, I am grateful to the Sociology and African American Studies departments and to the Institute for Policy Research for allowing me the time and support to complete this book. In particular, I thank Aldon Morris for his advocacy.

At the University of Chicago Press, I am especially grateful to Matthew Howard, whose enthusiasm and optimism energized me through the eighth, ninth, and *n*th readings of book drafts. Salena

Krug and Leslie Keros improved the book's flow and design, and did so with considerable sensitivity to the people and world I describe.

My parents blessed me with good genes, and my mother especially insisted that I use them. My older sisters and brothers—Cathy, Michael, Patrick, and Sheri—have showered me with love from the day I was born, preparing me for anything, including writing a book. Danny, Van II and III, B.J., and Dave are perfect additions to the family. And thank you, Joseph, for bringing even more happiness to my life.

Finally, the families in Groveland were not just the subjects of my research. I ate, played, worshiped, cried, and protested with them. I hope I have been faithful to those experiences in this book. They made me a part of their lives, and for that I will always be grateful.

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of *Black Picket Fences* is to richly describe the neighborhood-based social life of a population that has received little scholarly or popular attention—the black middle class. The black middle class and their residential enclaves are nearly invisible to the nonblack public because of the intense (and mostly negative) attention given to poor urban ghettos. Post-civil rights optimism erased upwardly mobile African Americans from the slate of interesting groups to study. However, the sparse research that does exist unequivocally indicates the continuing economic, residential, occupational, wealth, and socio-psychological disparities between blacks and whites, even within the middle class. In this book I focus on one realm of the black middle-class experience—the neighborhood context—by investigating how racial segregation, changing economic structures, and disproportionate black poverty affect the residential experience of black middle-class families, and especially youth. To accomplish this goal, I report on over three years of research in Groveland, a black middle-class neighborhood on Chicago's South Side.¹

Even though America is obsessed with race, some policy makers and even more average citizens act as if race no longer matters. The sweeping assaults on affirmative action programs are prime examples. Not even forty years since separate water fountains—which, in the scheme of Jim Crow prohibitions, were much less onerous than the exclusion of African Americans from libraries, museums, schools, and jobs—many Americans would now like to proceed as if the slate is clean and the scale is balanced. African Americans must compete solely on what each individual has been able to accomplish, and how each has performed. Without being too sarcastic, it is as if racism and racial inequalities died just before Elvis, and those who still claim that racism exists are as misguided as someone who regularly spots the King. Even though the facts say differently, such perceptions partially

rest on the visible progress that African Americans have made over the last half-century. The upward strides of many African Americans into the middle class have given the illusion that race cannot be the barrier that some make it out to be. The reality, however, is that even the black and white *middle classes* remain separate and unequal.

Much of the research and media attention on African Americans is on the black poor. Welfare debates, discussions of crime and safety, urban policy initiatives, and even the cultural uproar over things like rap music are focused on the situation of poor African Americans. With more than one in four African Americans living below the official poverty line (versus approximately one in nine whites), this is a reasonable and warranted bias. But rarely do we hear the stories of the other three-fourths, or the majority of African Americans, who may be the office secretary, the company's computer technician, a project manager down the hall, or the person who teaches our children. The growth of the black middle class has been hailed as one of the major triumphs of the civil rights movement, but if we have so little information on who makes up this group and what their lives are like, how can we be so sure that triumphant progress is the full story? The optimistic assumption of the 1970s and 1980s was that upwardly mobile African Americans were quietly integrating formerly all-white occupations, businesses, neighborhoods, and social clubs. Black middle- and working-class families were moving out of all-black urban neighborhoods and into the suburbs. With these suppositions, the black middle class dropped from under the scientific lens and off the policy agenda, even though basic evidence suggests that the public celebration of black middle-class ascendance has perhaps been too hasty.

We know, for example, that a more appropriate socioeconomic label for members of the black middle class is "lower middle class." The one black doctor who lives in an exclusive white suburb and the few African American lawyers who work at a large firm are not representative of the black middle class overall (but neither are their experiences identical to those of their white colleagues). And although most white Americans are also not doctors or lawyers, the lopsided distribution of occupations for whites does favor such professional and managerial jobs, whereas the black middle class is clustered in the sales and clerical fields. Because one's occupation affects one's income, African Americans have lower earnings. Yet the inequalities run even deeper than just income. Compound and exponentiate the current differences over a history of slavery and Jim Crow, and the nearly fourteenfold wealth advantage that whites enjoy over African