



Why Study the U.S. South? The Nexus of Race and Place in Investigating Black Student Achievement

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This article highlights the significance of the U.S. South in scholarly discussions regarding the academic achievement gap involving Black students. Despite national concern, patterns embedded in Black student achievement as related to geographical influences generally are ignored, especially in the South, where the majority of Black people in the United States reside. The authors refine the scholarship on the Black–White achievement gap through an analysis of racialized national spaces and population shifts, to set forth a more comprehensive understanding of school achievement than previously existed. In elucidating the nexus between race and place and the implications for Black student achievement, the authors specifically highlight the saliency of the U.S. South as a critical—and neglected—site for the investigation of such issues.

Keywords: African American education; Black student achievement; migration; race–place nexus; U.S. South

A number of scholars have researched and written about the disparities that exist between African American¹ and White students' academic outcomes in the United States, such as differences in standardized test scores, grades, and high school graduation rates (Carter, 2005; Diamond, 2006; Ferguson, 1998a, 1998b; Fordham, 1996; Horvat & O'Connor, 2006; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lee, 2002; Mickelson, 1990; O'Connor, 1997, 1999; O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007; Ogbu, 2003; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).² Not much scholarship, however, focuses explicitly on the U.S. South—historically considered the reservoir of African American culture in the nation as well as the place where most Black people reside—as a significant place to study in developing an understanding of the issue.³

In this article, we demonstrate how and why the geographical U.S. South is critical to understanding the dynamics of the achievement gap facing Black students. The academic community's knowledge of African American schooling in the South is primarily historical in nature, as a number of studies document how enslavement and legalized segregation disenfranchised Black people educationally (Anderson, 1988; Bullock, 1967; Butchart,

1980; Woodson, 1919), although African American people pressed toward self-education, literacy, and schooling in spite of systematic neglect (Cecelski, 1994; Morris & Morris, 2002; Siddle Walker, 1996; H. A. Williams, 2005). Although historical investigations foreground African American students' schooling in the South, most contemporary educational and social science studies ignore the South as a critical racial, cultural, political, and economic backdrop in Black education. The general absence of scholarship that specifically situates the contemporary U.S. South as an important region in understanding African American identity and schooling experiences has facilitated an uneven understanding of Black academic performance throughout the United States.

In elucidating our arguments in this article, we first present recent census data confirming that the South continues to be the place where the majority of Black people in the United States reside—thereby having major implications for dynamics of race, place, and educational opportunities and outcomes. Next, we operationalize our use of the term *the South* and provide two examples (one from historical New Orleans, Louisiana, and the other from National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health data) to illustrate the historical and contemporary significance of the region in shaping Black identity. We then offer three examples of how contemporary educational and social science studies do not fully account for the race–place nexus and the South's centrality in African American people's experiences. To demonstrate the value of conducting contemporary studies of Black student achievement in the South, we examine the state of Georgia and its contemporary significance as a major site of Black migration. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for future research, particularly as related to building on theories of Black student achievement.

Black Demographic Patterns in the United States

The neglect of the contemporary U.S. South in scholarly research on African American schooling in the present era, particularly in the discourse on the academic achievement gap, is surprising, given that the majority of the nation's Black population has always resided in the region. According to recent census data, the South, in comparison with other parts of the nation, had the largest net growth in Black populations between 1990 and 2000. Specifically, more than 3.6 million Black people migrated to the U.S. South during the 1990s, representing the largest internal migration of Black people since the Great Black Migration of the early-to-mid-20th century (Tamman & Suggs, 2001; U.S.

Census Bureau, 2000). In fact, two African Americans moved to the South for every Black person who left (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Figure 1, which shows changes in the U.S. Black population by region across three decades, reveals that the total Black population in the South increased from 53% in 1970 to 55.3% by 2002. A sizable number of those live in the South's urban centers.⁴ For example, although Black people represent 12.9% of the total U.S. population, 10 states in the South (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia), when combined, comprise 47% of the country's total Black population. Of the metropolitan areas with a population of 100,000 or more, 8 of the top 10 areas with the highest percentage of Black people were located in the South,⁵ including Birmingham, Alabama (74%); Jackson, Mississippi (73.5%); New Orleans, Louisiana (67.9%); Atlanta, Georgia (62.1%); Memphis, Tennessee (61.9%); and Richmond, Virginia (58.1%).⁶ Moreover, although only 3% of the counties in the United States are majority Black, 91 of the 96 predominantly Black counties are located in the South (McKinnon, 2001). The demographic distribution of Black people in the U.S. South, particularly the urban centers, emanates from multiple factors that have important social, political, economic, health, and educational consequences (Briggs, 2005; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilkes & Iceland, 2004).

Researchers know that the places where children live (e.g., the North, the Midwest, the South, suburbs, rural communities, or inner cities) have consequences for their social and educational outcomes (Ainsworth, 2002; Briggs, 2005; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealander, 1993; Catsambis & Beveridge, 2001; Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Rosenbaum, DeLuca, & Tuck, 2005). Scholars in disciplines such as geography have pushed to deepen analyses of race, place, and social spaces in U.S. society and the meanings and outcomes of those factors for differently positioned social groups (Holloway, 2000; Kobayashi & Peake, 2000; Mahtani, 2001; Nash, 2003). With few exceptions, however, the social science and policy communities have not given adequate attention to how contextual factors, such as geographic region, influence the achievement gap facing historically underserved groups.⁷

The neglect of the U.S. South's influence in shaping African American identity and schooling opportunities emanates, in part, from the dearth of empirical and conceptual research on how the nexus of race and regional place contribute to social, economic, political, and educational conditions and outcomes for African Americans, as well as for other racial and ethnic groups (Briggs, 2005; Morris, 2006; Rury & Mirel, 1997; Tate, 2008; Wells, 2006; Wilson, 1998). Scholars now collectively refer to this area of research as "the geography of opportunity" (see authors in Briggs's 2005 edited volume). Furthermore, despite being geographically positioned to lead in this neglected area of scholarly inquiry, colleges and universities based in the U.S. South have not taken full advantage of opportunities to understand how the intersection of race and place continues to shape the contemporary experiences of African American people in a range of areas.

Some aspects of our argument regarding the dynamic relationship among race, place, and schooling experiences and outcomes could be extrapolated to other racial and ethnic groups and

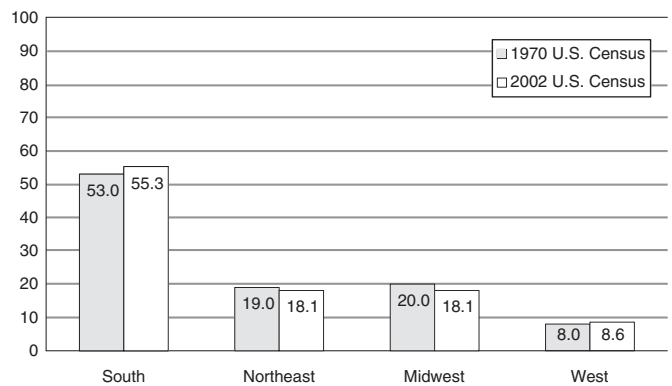


FIGURE 1. *Percentage Black population by region of the United States in 1970 and 2002.*

their relationship to specific geographical regions of the United States (e.g., Asian Americans and the West).⁸ However, we specifically use the case of African Americans and their unique relationship to the U.S. South to advance the scholarly community's understanding of how the race-place nexus influences academic outcomes. Moreover, although we focus on the implications for education, we urge other researchers to initiate and continue conversations on the implications of regional place in additional dimensions of Black life, such as health, housing, religion, and political representation.

Defining the South: Making Use of Geographical, Historical, and Cultural Lenses

Perceptions of the U.S. South and African American schooling often conjure up the historical image of a racially rigid region of the United States whose inhabitants, dichotomously but erroneously thought of as being only Black and White, lived worlds apart—always with Black people at the bottom and White people at the top of the hierarchy. Because U.S. practices and laws during the 19th and 20th centuries became demarcated along a Black-White binary, other groups are frequently consigned to the margins of the South's conventional narrative. For example, popular historical perceptions evoke images of segregated schools, separate water fountains, Black children being escorted by National Guardsmen in attempts to desegregate all-White schools, and other indignities such as being required to sit at the back of the bus. Alongside these images and perceptions, however, we offer an operational definition of the South that is geographical, historical, and cultural in nature. This approach textures the way the region is understood, particularly in terms of African American people's experiences, identity, and educational opportunities.

It is not our goal to vilify the South, as certainly other regions and the individuals in them were complicit in the social, political, and educational disenfranchisement of Black people. For example, the Northeastern region of the United States—and the White elite that historically has held power there—created and helped to support and maintain White racism and oppressive structures such as the enslavement of Africans during the 1700s and 1800s, which affected the relationship between Black (whether enslaved or free) and White people (whether slave

owner or not) for centuries to come. Moreover, White philanthropists from northern areas dictated the direction of schooling for Black children in the South (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001), often demanding that Black institutions promote primarily industrial education instead of what was considered “classical education” (Aldridge, 2008). Other regions also restricted Black people in business, residency, and schooling, but the southern states have always had a significantly larger Black population; consequently, White resistance to Black progress has been more overt and pernicious in the South, even after slavery was legally abolished (D. A. Bell, 2004; Irons, 2002; Kluger, 1977).

The South is commonly thought of as consisting of the states that seceded from the Union during the Civil War. However, it is usually defined historically as the states that had joined in protecting racial slavery in the United States by 1860. These states were Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia (and later, West Virginia), Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware, and Maryland. Yet the South is not easily defined simply in terms of the states that promoted racial slavery and its geographical boundaries, or the states encompassed by those boundaries. The South’s shared history and culture also give it meaning. For example, despite being a slave state, Delaware did not secede from the Union or join the other slave states during the Civil War. With its physical and cultural distance from the Deep South (which includes states such as Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina), Delaware is rarely regarded as a southern state (Southern Education Foundation [SEF], 2007).

The U.S. South is a region inclusive of various peoples (e.g., Whites, Blacks, Native American groups, Mexican Americans) and language patterns such as Creole, Appalachian, Spanish, and African American Vernacular English. Specific to Black communities, southern ports such as Charleston, South Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; and New Orleans, Louisiana, served as the points of entry and trade of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans; and it was in the various plantations and towns across the South that the majority of enslaved African people’s culture and language patterns became forged into what is commonly referred to as “African American” culture (for further discussions, see Baugh, 1999; Blassingame, 1973; Frazier, 1939; Herskovits, 1941).⁹ The cultural expressions, patterns, and identities associated with African American people evolved greatly in response to White racism and social, political, and economic oppression and inequality (African American Migration Experience, 2008; Barth, 1969).

As late as 1910, approximately 90% of the more than 9.8 million Black people in the United States still resided in the southern states (Gibson & Jung, 2002; Trotter, 1991; see Figure 2). This number began to change with the Great Black Migration of the early-to-mid-20th century, during which the nation witnessed a mass exodus of Black people out of the rural South to Northern and Midwestern states in search of greater political, social, and economic “promised lands” (Davis & Donaldson, 1975; Farley & Allen, 1987). From 1910 to 1930, the percentage of Black people residing in rural areas of the South declined from 72.6% to 56.3% (African American Migration Experience, 2008; Rose, 1969). This decline was a result of several factors,

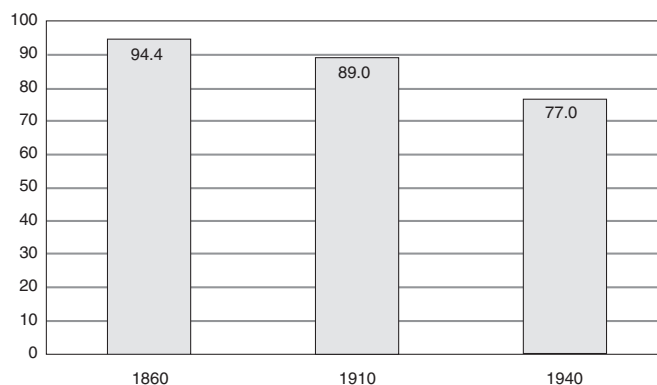


FIGURE 2. *Black percentage of population in the U.S. South, 1860–1940.*

such as Black people’s perception that other regions offered greater opportunities and White violence in southern rural areas that sometimes resulted in the banishment of entire Black communities as late as the early 20th century (M. Williams, 2007).

The aforementioned imagery of the South as a bastion of segregation and inequality contrasted sharply with perceived opportunities for Black people in the North, the Midwest, and later the West. For millions of Black people who were confined to the South during slavery and legalized segregation, these other regions represented a “promised land” of better schooling, housing, and employment (Arnesen, 2002; Brown, 1965; Lemann, 1991; Sernett, 1997). Unfortunately, the representation of such regions as lands of opportunity sometimes proved to be untrue (Brown, 1965; Franklin, 1979; Homel, 1984; Mohraz, 1979).¹⁰ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, in their book *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945), captured Black migration from the U.S. South to the North, and Black settlement and community structure in Chicago. By the middle of the 20th century, the city of Chicago had become an immense gathering place for Black migrants from the U.S. South. Drake and Cayton illustrate how middle-class White people’s attitudes and the use of formal and informal controls limited Black people to certain sections of the city. They note that, by 1930, “three-fourths of all the residential property in the city was bound by restrictive covenants. It could not be rented or sold to Negroes” (p. 184).¹¹ Consequently, once Black arrivals reached Chicago and other cities, their limited mobility resulted in ghettos and “slum” neighborhoods that continue to prevail today.

Although Black people left the South en masse during the Great Black Migration, more than 50% have remained there, and many of these individuals have relocated from rural to urban areas (Lewis, 1991; Trotter, 1991). Yet social scientists’ heavy emphasis on migration out of the South misses how southern experiences continue to frame Black life in new locales and obscures the significance and stories of African Americans who have remained in the South.

The South’s unique importance for any effort to understand African American life, identity, and schooling is evident in its dual role of being the poorest region of the country and being perceived as offering unique economic and social opportunities, particularly for African Americans. It is the only region of the

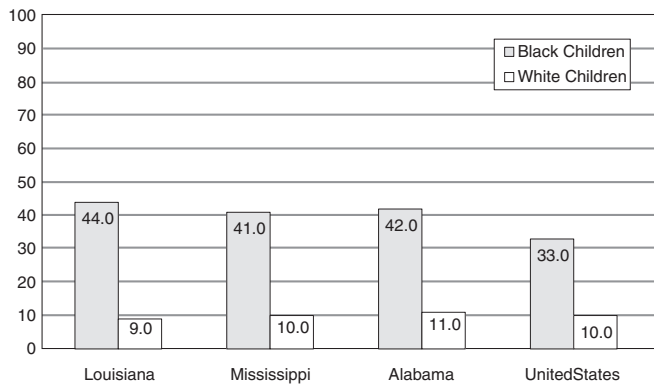


FIGURE 3. Poverty percentage for Black and White children in selected southern states and in the United States as a whole, 2004. Data are from National Center for Children in Poverty (www.nccp.org). Copyright 2005 by National Center for Children in Poverty. Adapted with permission.

United States where the majority of public school children are low income (SEF, 2007). Black children’s disproportionate level of representation among low-income populations causes them to be most affected by the consequences of poverty. For instance, even before Hurricane Katrina devastated portions of the U.S. Gulf Coast, Black children in the Deep South were far more likely to live in poverty than White Children (see Fass & Cauthen, 2005; Morris, 2008; also see Figure 3). In addition, southern states have high rates of underemployment and unemployment among adult populations and provide the least educational resources to low-income students; the South, in fact, has the lowest per pupil expenditures in the nation (SEF, 2007, p. 11).

At the same time, however, the U.S. South is a major site for the return migration of Black people (Stack, 1996; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) and encompasses an increasing Black professional population in cities such as Charlotte, North Carolina; Richmond, Virginia; Houston, Texas; and Atlanta, Georgia.

Geography also influences how people come to understand notions of race and ethnicity, how their lives unfold, how they interact within and across various subgroups, and how individuals become identified (Jackson & Penrose, 1994; Keith & Pile, 1993). Place, therefore, has important consequences for individuals’ social and educational opportunities. To illustrate how place is implicated in African Americans’ lives, we provide a historical and a contemporary example that foregrounds the southern region of the United States.

Example 1: Black New Orleans and the Complexity of Race

Throughout the history of the United States, phenotypic characteristics were used to mark “racial differences” in order to legitimate racism, prejudice, and discrimination (Omi & Winant, 1994). Such classifications created a hierarchical arrangement of so-called races, with White people at the top and enslaved Africans at the bottom.¹² Although the greater part of the United States has operated with more rigid demarcations of “Black” and “White” since the country’s founding, the city of New Orleans was more nuanced in its racial designations until the Civil War.

For more than a century after its founding by the French in 1718, New Orleans—which was more of a French city than an American city before the Civil War, and at one time the largest slave trading center in the United States—maintained a racial hierarchy constituted by a three-caste system: (a) Whites; (b) free people of color, commonly called free Negroes; and (c) enslaved Africans (Blassingame, 1973). During the Haitian Revolution between 1791 and 1804, and until 1810, approximately 10,000 immigrants from Haiti (French colonists, free Creoles of color, and thousands of enslaved Black people) arrived in New Orleans. Although slavery had been outlawed in Haiti as a result of the Black-led revolution in that newly formed country, it was permissible in New Orleans. Thus New Orleans witnessed a marked increase in its free people of color and enslaved Black population in the early 1800s. Although the free Negroes (those already living in New Orleans and the new arrivals from Haiti) were not in bondage like the enslaved Black population and had some semblances of freedom, they were not allowed to vote, were prevented from socializing in public with White people, and were used as a buffer between Whites and dark-complexioned Black people (Blassingame, 1973). According to C. C. Bell (2004),

By more than doubling the population of French-speaking people of color, the approximately three thousand men, women, and children strengthened the city’s existing three-caste society developed under French and Spanish rule. Their reinforcement of the city’s tripartite society ran counter to a dual Anglo-American racial order that attempted to confine all persons of African descent—both free and enslaved—to a separate and inferior caste. Southern political realities required the cross-class unity of all whites and the immersion of all blacks into a single and subservient racial caste. (pp. 39–40)

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* court decision in 1896 symbolically represented the solidification of the social hierarchy in New Orleans into a system of two castes rather than the three that existed before the Civil War. In that historic court case, Homer Plessy of New Orleans—who was considered one-eighth Black and seven-eighths White—was denied a seat in the Whites-only part of a train in Louisiana. Plessy insisted that he should be able to sit in the Whites-only section, instead of the Colored section that was reserved for Negroes. The *Plessy* decision reinforced Jim Crow restrictions on Black people in public accommodations whether light- or dark-complexioned, solidified the demise of the tripartite racial hierarchy in the city, and, at the same time, continued to forge a larger racial identity among the Black people in the city of New Orleans *across color lines*. It also cemented the continued denial of Black people’s social and educational rights in New Orleans and throughout the United States well into the middle of the 20th century. *Plessy* adversely affected the schooling opportunities for Black children in that city—and elsewhere—for decades to come (also see Morris, 2008).

Example 2: Race, Geography, and Adolescent Identity

Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, commonly known as Add Health (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2007), provide important insights on the effects of the nexus of race and place on how multiracial adolescents identify themselves when having to

choose the one race that best describes them. Initiated in 1994, Add Health is a comprehensive survey of adolescents in the United States, originally used to examine how social contexts influenced adolescents' health behaviors. Wave I (1994–1995) focused on the health behaviors of youths in Grades 7–12. In doing so, the survey provided the opportunity for adolescent participants from 80 high schools and 52 middle schools to provide self-reported race data. In the interviews (83,135 at school and 18,924 at home), adolescents were given the option of identifying themselves as members of up to five racial groups. Those who identified as members of more than one racial group (i.e., stated that they had parents of two different races), were then given the option of choosing which racial group best described them. Nationally, White/Black adolescents were more likely to choose “Black” (approximately 75%) rather than “White” as the identity that best described them. Fourteen percent of White/American Indian adolescents chose “American Indian” only, and approximately 47% of White/Asian adolescents chose “Asian” only (Harris & Sim, 2002).

The overwhelming decision by White/Black adolescents to choose Black as the racial group that best described them illustrates the persistent applicability of the “one-drop rule” in the contemporary United States. Originating in the South during slavery, the one-drop rule stated that if a person had any blood of traceable African descent, he or she would be classified as Black. The one-drop rule was used to preserve so-called White racial purity, increase the slave population, and exempt White slaveholders from passing assets on to their multiracial offspring (for further discussion, see Daniel, 2001).

Harris and Sim's (2002) quantitative analysis of data from the Add Health survey found that in the southern region of the United States, in comparison with other regions of the nation, adolescents who had a White parent and a Black parent were more likely to choose Black as the identity that best described them. According to Harris and Sim, “When white/black youth live in the South, they are significantly *less likely* to select white as their best single race” (p. 623). Such identification by multiracial adolescents captures the rigidity of the Black/White binary in the United States in general, but particularly in the South, as well as the politics of racial identification. It is possible that these respondents avoided choosing the multiracial category not in an effort to be inaccurate but because societal norms, in many ways, imposed an identity on them. Moreover, their choice of Black instead of White might also reflect a sense of racial solidarity with other Black people.

How one decides to identify is not a haphazard process but is, instead, a function of larger social, political, and economic forces, as well as of real or imagined psychological benefits of being associated with a larger community of people. And the U.S. South, as the Add Health study illustrates, continues to shape the ways in which African American people identify and become identified. Thus it is critically important to foreground the southern United States in contemporary scholarly investigations that attempt to further the understanding of how issues of identity shape African American students' schooling experiences and outcomes. Not only has the South as a geographical region historically shaped African American people's experiences, but it

continues to inform our scholarly understanding of African American identity and culture (particularly in terms of language) beyond the geographical boundaries of the region (see Baugh, 1999; Foster, 1997; Lanehart, 2001; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 1977).

Foregrounding Race and Place in Black Student Achievement

In this section, we illustrate the benefits of foregrounding geographical place, particularly the U.S. South, in scholarly research on Black student achievement. We emphasize the methodological and conceptual problems of omitting or inadequately analyzing the impact of regional place as a mediating influence in the findings of both quantitative and qualitative studies of African American students' academic achievement. In doing so, we present three thematic strands that capture our critique of contemporary scholarship on African American identity and school achievement: (a) the omission of the significance of regional place; (b) reference to the South as an incidental rather than a deliberate backdrop; and (c) the need for greater attention to the race–place nexus in national surveys of African Americans that elicit their perspectives on schooling. Although obviously not inclusive of every study of African American identity and school achievement, the studies we present are some of the most cited in this area of research, and our analyses illustrate the benefits of a regionally sensitive perspective when conceptually and methodologically framing empirical investigations of African American identity and school achievement.

Strand 1: The Omission of the Significance of Regional Place

An initial concern that we have regarding studies of Black identity and school achievement is the omission of the significance of regional place, despite the call by the social science community for a greater focus on contextual factors in understanding school achievement. Granted, ethnographic researchers who have studied Black identity and school achievement often take care to note how their particular studies are germane to the school contexts they are investigating. Unfortunately, however, these studies often omit consideration of how the regional place or the larger context (i.e., macrocontext) in which the ethnographic investigation is based might further shape the findings within the ethnographic setting. To illustrate this first strand of our argument, we use a study by John Ogbu (2003) that was conducted in a predominantly White and affluent suburb. Ogbu is largely credited with introducing and popularizing explanations such as oppositional identity development, aversion toward “acting White,” academic disengagement, and the nature of African Americans' historical entry into U.S. society as explanatory factors for low scholastic performance.¹³

In *Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement* (2003), Ogbu broke from the longstanding tradition of investigating the experiences of low-income Black students primarily in urban communities and schools. Although other scholars have investigated the Black middle class (Lacy, 2007; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999), Ogbu was one of the first to investigate the role of community forces, such as a group's

beliefs about schooling and upward mobility, in contributing to academic disengagement and disparities among “Black middle-class” students in an affluent and predominantly White suburban context.¹⁴ Ogbu’s conclusions echoed many of his previous arguments by emphasizing the role of African American culture in poor schooling outcomes, rather than also discussing the larger schooling and community forces in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

Recent scholars have presented thorough challenges to the validity of Ogbu’s collective ideas and interpretations (Carter, 2005; Nasir, 2004; Tyson et al., 2005). We suggest that Ogbu’s inattention to the relationships among the micro (student), meso (school), and macro (larger community) contexts is equally problematic. Ogbu’s conclusion that African American students and families were complicit in Black children’s academic disengagement ignored the need for a comprehensive analysis of how structural influences in schools (e.g., tracking), districts (e.g., policies and faculty hiring practices), and communities (e.g., residential and employment patterns) contributed to African American students’ educational disparities. Broader issues of race and social class within the Shaker Heights suburb, the state of Ohio, and the Midwest overall were ignored. For instance, Ogbu confounds the social class of Black families with that of White families by equating White families and Black families as having similar social classes, although 58% of White families in Shaker Heights during the 1990 Census had family incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000, as compared with only 32.6% of Black families.

Ogbu also overlooked historical patterns of African American migration to Rust Belt cities in the Midwest such as Cleveland, Ohio (adjacent to Shaker Heights); Detroit, Michigan; Gary, Indiana; and Chicago, Illinois—all of which had a significant urbanized and low-income Black population by 1970.¹⁵ This omission misses a deeper understanding of the African American community’s evolution out of the U.S. South and into the Midwest. The absence of any family profiles or participants’ histories decontextualizes the study and its findings—particularly within the context of overarching African American migration patterns such as the Great Black Migration during the early and middle 20th century; the Second Great Black Migration, which lasted from 1941 to 1970 (Arnesen, 2002; Farley & Allen, 1987; Lemann, 1991); and the recent city-to-suburban relocation among African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002, 2005).¹⁶ For example, where did these Black families in Shaker Heights emigrate from? How did Black families’ longevity, economic stability, and educational histories in Shaker Heights compare with those of White families? How did Black students’ schooling experiences and outcomes compare with those of their parents and grandparents? And to what extent does the story set in Shaker Heights, Ohio, typify “middle-class” Black students’ experiences in suburban school contexts, given that Black families’ social and economic statuses were not comparable to those of White families? A careful consideration of regional place could facilitate a historically grounded understanding of African Americans’ experiences in Shaker Heights in a range of areas, such as employment, neighborhood residence, school assignments, academic tracking, teacher expectations, and race relations.¹⁷

Strand 2: Reference to the South as an Incidental Rather Than Deliberate Backdrop

The U.S. South has been a favored setting for historical accounts of segregated Black schooling and the push for desegregation (Dempsey & Noblit, 1996; Morris & Morris, 2002; Siddle Walker, 1996). However, contemporary empirical studies based in the U.S. South seldom comment on the unique importance of the region for understanding the schooling experiences of Black children who reside there. Among the more recent educational research studies based in the U.S. South that focus on African American schooling (e.g., DeBray-Pelot, 2007; Goldring, Cohen-Vogel, Smrekar, & Taylor, 2006; Lipman, 1998; Mickelson, 2001; Morris, 2003; Tyson et al., 2005), the significance of the region has been mostly incidental to the studies rather than deliberately placed in the forefront.

We use the study by Tyson et al. (2005) to highlight how the U.S. South often plays an incidental role in contemporary educational and social science research studies of African American schooling. This study, conducted in North Carolina, illuminates the relationships between racialized peer pressure and high academic achievement and provides a major contribution to scholarly debates on the role of identity in school achievement. In their sociological study of 11 North Carolina schools (6 high schools, 2 middle schools, and 3 elementary schools), the authors concluded that school structure, especially classroom racial composition, influenced Black (and White) students’ attitudes toward their high-achieving peers.

Rather than relying primarily on cultural explanations to inform their findings, Tyson et al. (2005) took the important step of connecting participants’ views of schooling to institutional characteristics of the respective schools. According to their data, Black students generally did not perceive themselves as being the targets of racial animosity from their Black peers. When charges of “acting White” did emerge, the accusations tended to transpire in schools characterized by stark socioeconomic differences between Black and White students, where White youth dominated enrollment in advanced placement courses. Thus there was animosity toward those few privileged Black students in the school who were enrolled in the advanced courses. Tyson et al.’s findings were important in part because they stressed the culpability of institutional factors within schools—which often come to be interpreted as cultural forces—in cultivating racially identifiable attitudes toward student achievement for both Black and White children. The authors write:

The patterns identified in this study suggest that institutional structures may shape how culture is enacted in school in response to a burden of high achievement among black students, whether it manifests itself in opposition to white norms or—as is common to most adolescents—as concern about being perceived as arrogant, a “dork,” or a “nerd.” (p. 600)

Tyson et al. (2005) should be lauded for demonstrating the role of school structures in giving rise to patterns that appear to be cultural, and the consequences of those structures for student achievement. Yet, like many researchers who have conducted empirical studies in the U.S. South, the authors do not take the additional

step of connecting their findings to the racial politics and dynamics of schooling that African American children face in the southern context where this study was based, thereby possibly producing a more comprehensive and sociopolitically grounded analysis. For example, to what extent may the level of White or Black political power within the various southern school districts (e.g., urban, suburban, or rural) shape racialized perceptions and opportunities for Black students within schools? And to what extent are the southern locales, school districts, and specific schools responsive to Black constituents' demands? Moreover, how might the sociopolitical context shape Black students' perceptions of their opportunities for social and educational success?

Tyson et al. (2005) found that the Black students who attended rural schools were more likely to experience animosity from other Black students because of disparities in income and status between rural Whites and Blacks. These findings, which Tyson et al. did not fully explore in their study, point to the importance of understanding Black students' perceptions of educational opportunities in rural contexts. Notably, although only approximately 12% of African Americans reside in rural areas of the United States, an overwhelming 90% of the rural Black population lives in the southern states (Cromartie & Beale, 1996).

Anthropologists and sociologists of education have illuminated how cultural forces and structural patterns within schools influence African American students' academic outcomes. But the political structure and the racial dynamics of urban, suburban, and rural school districts also shape African American students' access to rigorous academic curriculum, their perceptions of educational opportunities, the quality of their teachers, and other factors that influence their educational outcomes (see Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999; Johnson, 2002). Therefore, the politics of the schooling of African American students cannot be overlooked in the interpretation and analyses of sociological and anthropological findings—whether at the student, family, community, or school levels.

Strand 3: The Need for Greater Attention to the Race–Place Nexus in National Surveys of African Americans That Elicit Their Perspectives on Schooling

The previous two strands highlight studies that employed qualitative research methods. In the third strand, we illustrate how survey-based studies might also benefit from a greater attention to the race–place nexus in scholarly research on Black people in general, and on African American schooling in the South in particular. Large-scale data sets such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress are useful for probing educational experiences and trajectories across a range of student demographics. For instance, scholars have made use of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the High School and Beyond surveys in their work (e.g., Phillips, Crouse, & Ralph, 1998).

Specific to issues of identity and Black students' academic achievement, Cook and Ludwig (1998) used the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) to investigate three questions: Do African American adolescents report greater alienation from school than do non-Hispanic Whites? Does academic success lead to social ostracism among Black adolescents? And do the social costs or benefits of academic success differ by race? Overall,

the authors found that “Black high school students are not particularly alienated from school” and are not rendered unpopular by academic success (p. 390). Black students were as likely as White students to expect to enter and complete college, and actual graduation rates among Black students were comparable to those of their White peers from the same socioeconomic backgrounds. Cook and Ludwig also found that Black students were “more likely than Whites to be members of academic honor societies or to win academic awards, and . . . equally likely to receive high marks in English” (p. 390). The authors concluded that both Black and White students find social acceptance for academic effort and that the study's results did not support “the belief that group differences in peer attitudes account for the black–white gap in educational achievement” (p. 392).

Also using NELS data, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) assessed the “oppositional culture” explanation for the achievement gap. Contrary to the oppositional culture thesis, they found that Black students recognized the value of education in gaining employment and had higher expectations than White students concerning their future employment. With regard to the “acting White” thesis, which further asserts that academically successful Black students run the risk of not being popular, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey concluded that Black students who were perceived to be very good students were also very popular with their peers, a finding supported by the Cook and Ludwig (1998) study. However, neither Cook and Ludwig nor Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey speak to the heterogeneity of Black students by ethnicity (see O'Connor et al., 2007) or the role of region in shaping Black students' perceptions of their opportunities. For instance, historically Black colleges and universities are disproportionately located in the southern states (SEF, 2003; United Negro College Fund, 2001). It is possible that the greater availability of these schooling options in some regions of the country shapes African American high school students' beliefs about academic possibilities beyond high school.

Researchers affiliated with the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) began to address the issue of regional representation through their focus on 15 participating urban–suburban school districts, which were recognized for their academic reputations, well-established economic support of public schools, and greater underachievement among Black students than among White and Asian students. Using the Ed-Excel Assessment of Secondary School Student Culture (developed by Ronald Bishop), Ronald Ferguson (2002) surveyed more than 8,000 middle and high school Black students (out of a total of more than 40,000 students) across the 15 districts, which were middle- and upper-middle-income areas located near predominantly White universities.¹⁸ Contrary to the notion that these African American students were academically disengaged (as Ogbu concluded in his study of Shaker Heights), Ferguson's analysis of survey data revealed that Black students' stated desire to achieve in school was greater than that of their White peers; yet the Black students performed less well on measures of student achievement. The findings were more extensive than the information we present here, but Ferguson's analysis aptly demonstrated how even highly touted school districts struggle with achievement disparities.¹⁹ Yet, of the 15 districts included in the

survey by MSAN researchers, only 2 were in the South (Arlington, Virginia, and the Chapel Hill–Carrboro City Schools in North Carolina). None were located in the area traditionally known as the Deep South.

Despite worthy contributions that have emanated from the collection and use of national data sets and surveys, scholars employing ethnographic research methods (see Carter, 2005; Fordham, 1988; Tyson et al., 2005) note the methodological limitations of interviews and survey data (as opposed to observational data) in capturing the differences between what Black students say and what they actually do; these scholars also note the limited use of survey data to ascertain Black students' heterogeneity by ethnicity (O'Connor et al., 2007). Neither of the previously discussed quantitative studies captured how Black students' experiences may have varied by ethnicity. As a consequence, social scientists must develop more refined data sets and studies that explore the impact of contextual influences, such as region of the country, on how Black adolescents (across ethnicities) identify themselves and consequently negotiate identity and schooling.

We emphasize that it is important for social scientists who rely on survey data to be cognizant of the need for regional caveats in their work and of the importance of region for research conceptualization, data collection, and interpretation. To minimize the inherent limitations of survey data in this area, we posit that researchers aiming to construct a nationally representative sample of Black participants should deliberately stratify their methods along several lines. On one level, when focusing on the African American population, statisticians should oversample the South and attempt to capture the magnitude of Black residential patterns. Survey (and ethnographic) investigations of Black youth in the South will capture a range of Black students, including (a) suburban Black youth who live in and attend schools in racially dissimilar suburbs; (b) urban Black children who come from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds; and (c) Black residents in rural locales. Moreover, researchers should be cognizant of the various ways that Black students may or may not identify ethnically or racially. An important step that could begin to mitigate some of these limitations is to intentionally highlight the nexus of race and place in research studies that focus on Black students' academic experiences and outcomes. We use some of the emergent findings from our research in a specific state in the U.S. South to illustrate how this may occur.

Why Study the U.S. South? Research Possibilities in Georgia

As previously established, researchers have not fully investigated how regional place, particularly the U.S. South, molds Black life in general and, consequently, Black students' schooling experiences, opportunities, and outcomes. Close attention to recent Black migration patterns and demographic shifts in the southern United States will, we believe, unearth nuances about identity, life, and learning that social scientists have been slow to discover—at least as related to the nation's Black residents. Georgia, in particular, provides an example of how social dynamics operate to place Black communities in a range of circumstances that influence Black students' academic outcomes.

Perceptions and statistical data from Georgia present compelling and sometimes contradictory images of the state. Atlanta, the capital city, is a thriving national and international metropolis that is home to major corporations (e.g., the Coca-Cola Company), hosted the 1996 Olympic Games, and enjoys a long-standing reputation as a historical center of Black political, religious, educational, and artistic life. It is the birth home of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and home to other civil rights leaders and icons such as former United Nations Ambassador and Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young and Joseph Lowery of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Atlanta's political legacy includes former Mayor Maynard Jackson and current Mayor Shirley Franklin. The Atlanta metropolitan area serves as home to an array of predominantly Black colleges and universities such as Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Clark Atlanta University; to numerous predominantly Black megachurches; and to Black actors, producers, athletes, and popular recording stars. However, against this backdrop of Black success, the 2000 U.S. Census revealed that more than one third of Atlanta's families lived below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004a). From 2000 to 2004, the city's child poverty rate rose from 39.3% to 48.1%, making Atlanta the number one city in the United States in terms of percentage of children living in poverty.²⁰

Atlanta's predominantly Black population (61.4%) allows for continued lines of research anchored around urban Black populations. However, the state of Georgia differs from many states in that Atlanta's nearby counties permit scholars to learn about Black schooling in suburban and rural centers simultaneously. Georgia is one of few states in the nation where researchers can learn about Black students in a major urban city, in qualitatively different suburban settings, and in rural counties with significant Black populations—all in the same overarching state and regional setting. Moreover, despite social and economic variations, these schooling contexts are all nested in a larger conservative White context. Remnants of the racialized "Old South"—a political and economic system that actively stripped Black people of human rights—persist in government-supported spaces such as Stone Mountain Park, which contains a large stone carving of three Confederate figures of the Civil War.

In an earlier study of high-achieving Black adolescents' perceptions of the achievement gap, Morris and Fuller (2007) unveiled how participants' upbringing in a predominantly Black suburb molded school expectations, opportunities, and outcomes. The findings suggest that participants embraced meritocratic beliefs that school success would pay off, and articulated strong convictions regarding their decision to select and excel in challenging classes, despite an expressed awareness of racial and gender stereotypes. Both males' and females' reflections suggested encounters with school-based teasing, yet *none* of the study participants perceived the activity as malicious or altered their scholastic or racial identity in response to such comments. This finding differs from prior authors' conclusions regarding adolescents' decisions to become raceless (Fordham, 1988) or to adopt oppositional identities (Ogbu, 2003). Morris and Fuller's findings appeared to be explained, in part, by adolescents' exposure to the ethos of Black upward mobility associated with the Atlanta metropolitan area and its common projection of successful African American people in a range of areas.

The Black suburban context where the Morris and Fuller study was based has attracted thousands of Black families over the past decade and is located in one of the fastest growing Black communities in the United States—metropolitan Atlanta—also known as “Black Mecca” because of the rapid increase in its Black population. During the 1990s, the Black population in this suburban locale grew from 131,000 to nearly 360,000. In a total population of 665,865, Black residents made up 54%. The public school system, on the other hand, had more than 100,000 students, 80% of whom were Black.

Home to many predominantly African American suburban subdivisions and communities, the county outpaced all other counties in Georgia in terms of Black buying power and was at the center of the largest growth spurt of any Black community in the United States. Much of the growth was seen in the southern part of the county, where several affluent Black communities sprouted during the 1990s. In addition to the major demographic shifts in the African American population in the county and the school system, African Americans also occupied key political and educational positions. The county elected its first African American chief executive officer (similar to a mayor) in 2000, hired its first African American school superintendent in 2002, and elected a predominantly African American school board in 2004. Of the almost 14,000 teachers and classified staff, approximately 55% were White and 45% were African American.

Building on this earlier research (Morris & Fuller, 2007; Morris & Gibbs, 2006), Morris is now leading a 4-year longitudinal and ethnographic study of Black adolescents across three demographically dissimilar high schools (one middle-income, predominantly Black school; one Title I, predominantly Black school; and one middle-income, racially diverse school). Conceptually, the current study embeds ethnographic investigations of adolescents, schools, and classrooms into a macrostudy of the Black suburban context (i.e., the larger sociohistorical, political, and economic forces in the county) to provide a multifaceted account of how Black achievement is understood by adolescents, families, school personnel, and local communities. The study also includes more than 100 interviews with parents, teachers, support personnel, the district superintendent, school board members, members of religious groups, community organizers and leaders, and elected officials.

Preliminary findings reveal how Black participants’ perceptions appear to be informed by lived realities in a middle-income, predominantly Black county. For example, neither high- nor low-achieving students saw school success as a racialized endeavor. High-achieving African American adolescents described themselves (and were characterized by other students) as popular figures traveling self-determined roads. Sources for students’ and parents’ beliefs included familial influences, local examples of success, and encouragement from friends, family members, and educators who had experienced differential levels of school success themselves. Student participants were generally unaware of the “acting White” hypothesis and rejected the idea that high achievement demanded a “raceless” (Fordham, 1996) identity. Individual self-determination was overwhelmingly seen as the greatest factor for success. For many of the students, this stance overpowered other contextual circumstances related to parental involvement, tracking, and peer

influences. Many high school students supported their views with evidence of Black upward mobility in the Atlanta metropolitan context.

Although the absence of deficit ideas in participants’ responses is encouraging, the study’s findings are complicated by district-level trends that reveal disparities between Black and White students’ academic opportunities and outcomes. For example, although White students constitute approximately 10% of the total student population in the district, they represent more than 37% of the children in gifted education (Grantham & Harris, 2007). Although the school district has named closing the achievement gap as one of the top system priorities, paradoxically, school district leaders are addressing the problem through policies that avoid calling explicit attention to race, seemingly because of the sensitive sociopolitical context, in which predominantly White areas of the county have taken steps to form separate municipalities. Because economically and politically powerful White areas can sway decisions and resources in the county, growth in the Black population and African Americans’ movement into strategic positions of power are exerting little impact on the design or implementation of policies and practices specific to the improvement of Black schooling. District officials, in fact, have acknowledged the absence of any targeted steps designed to raise achievement outcomes among Black students, specifically. Ameliorative initiatives, rather, are being implemented generically in the hope that gains will unfold among Black students as a logical corollary. Black student academic needs are being subsumed under race-blind goals that are palatable and supported by many of the county’s White constituents.

We have presented the above example to illustrate how careful attention to the nexus of race and place (particularly the politics of race in specific locales) can shape not only the overall focus of scholarly investigations and the kinds of research questions that are asked, but also how ethnographic and sociological findings on school achievement and identity (e.g., from participants’ interviews, observations, and surveys) might be interpreted within a particular social, political, and economic context. Yet, within the state of Georgia, researchers may elicit different results from rural public school districts that have significant Black populations but are located primarily in the southern part of the state. Although Black people are in the majority in some school districts, the influence of race is ever present, thereby suggesting the need for discourses that consider the primacy of race and place. And similar studies—whether based in the South or other regions—must interrogate how race and place are interconnected, as well as the sociohistorical context that shapes Black participants’ presence in particular regions of the United States. Researchers are obligated to probe the nature of race relations, the implications for families, and the resulting consequences for children’s schooling. Absent such an analysis, findings and discussions about the academic achievement gap facing Black students are wanting.

Future Research Directions and Conclusions

The scholarly community has the potential to move theoretical and empirical conversations forward by situating educational equity dilemmas, such as the achievement gap facing African American students, within a broader understanding of the

race–place nexus. Here, we provide suggestions on how a deliberate focus on the U.S. South might advance major scholarly understandings of African American identity and academic achievement. Emphasis is placed on stereotype threat, cultural difference theory, and structural explanations, as they dominate academic discussions on Black identity and achievement.

Stereotype Threat

Based on research conducted at the collegiate level, Claude Steele (1992) argues that Black Americans' educational performance is influenced by racial stigmatization, which extends beyond overt racism and traditional manifestations of prejudice to encompass Black devaluation by omission and aversive racism. When Black students do succeed, overarching preconceptions of Black shortcomings continuously force students to reestablish their academic stature and nullify pejorative characterizations. Steele (1992, 1999, 2003) and Steele and Aronson (1995) assert that Black students' battle against stigmatization results in a demoralized cadre of young people who become vulnerable to failure. Psychologists use the term *stereotype threat* to refer to underachievement resulting from students' fear of confirming group stereotypes.

A number of scholars have extended Steele and Aronson's earlier work (e.g., see Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Fryer, 2006) and shown how stereotype threat is a persuasive line of reasoning for explaining some Black students' underperformance. Both teachers and students modify their behaviors according to racial influences. Teachers, for example, may limit Black students' engagement with academic rigor by asking them easier questions than White students are asked, or by holding one-dimensional perceptions of the children in their charge. Simultaneously, students determined to perform well on a given task may be derailed by concerns that they will confirm unfavorable ideas about their group.

A basic argument behind stereotype threat is that an individual's treatment in concrete situations is influenced by his or her social identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, or social class). To date, researchers have learned that stereotype threat most affects young people who closely identify with their ethnicity or gender, are critically aware of societal stigmas, are accepting of stereotypes, and see intelligence as a relatively fixed enterprise. Black K–12 students' upbringing in the South—a region marked by strong African American identity, stark economic disparities, and psychological attacks on Black people's humanity and intellect during and after enslavement—may create conditions in which stereotype threat is both real and deeply entrenched. Unfortunately, however, few social scientists have investigated whether or how stereotype threat plays out among Black K–12 students anywhere in the United States, including the South.

Cultural Difference Theory

Proponents of cultural difference theories speculate that gulfs between students' school and home lives limit their opportunities for favorable schooling outcomes, particularly in the cases of racial and ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged students. Supporters of these theories spotlight the added value of adapting educational settings and practices to support youths' backgrounds, for instance by attending to culturally related learning

styles (Hale-Benson, 1982), by culturally synchronizing school and home cultures (Irvine, 1990), and by practicing culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

A well-publicized area of cultural difference between African American students and institutional cultures has been the controversy centered on Black language patterns and Standard English, more commonly referred to as the “Ebonics debate” (Baugh, 1999; Foster, 1997; Lanehart, 2001; Perry & Delpit, 1998; Rickford & Rickford, 2000; Smitherman, 1977). Some observers hold that low-income Black students' use of African American vernacular undercuts their academic achievement, as their language may lead teachers to see them as less academically capable. Yet an often overlooked element of this debate in Michigan (see *Martin Luther King Junior Elementary School Children et al. v. Ann Arbor School District Board*, 1979) and Oakland, California, in 1996 is that many Black children in Ann Arbor and Oakland used language patterns that were common to Black southerners. The maintenance of African American speech patterns outside the South was, perhaps, partially supported by racialized housing patterns, whereby linguistic norms originally introduced by southern migrants were passed along and sustained by subsequent generations. Thus, when the children and grandchildren of these Black migrants went to school, educators who were unfamiliar with the richness of African American spoken language were not fully equipped to build on the language that these children brought. Connecting African Americans' linguistic patterns nationally to the southern United States provides a reference point from which to understand the persistence of African American Vernacular English in other parts of the United States and its continuous role in shaping the various forms of African American identity today.

In a similar vein, scholars might ask how language variations among African American residents from the South, African American return migrants from outside the South, and recent Black immigrants and their children influence educators' perceptions of Black students' academic or intellectual abilities. Immigrant gateway cities such as Miami, New York, Boston, and Chicago provide locales in which scholars have learned about various groups with some degree of substantive depth. However, the South remains in its infancy—at least comparatively speaking—with regard to investigations that explore the social and educational experiences of foreign-born, first- and second-generation Black populations. As a consequence, timely opportunities exist to conduct regional studies comparing traditional centers of migration such as New York and Boston with areas such as Atlanta and Miami, and to explore how social forces such as racism and discrimination affect Black populations that may or may not identify ethnically as African Americans. What does cultural difference theory mean, for example, in an area such as southern Florida where schools serve a myriad of Black populations, including Haitian refugees, Caribbean immigrants, and African Americans? How might historically rigid notions of “race,” “African American,” and “Black” be contested by individuals who might not identify themselves as African American (see Rong & Brown, 2001; Waters, 1999; Woldemikael, 1989). This emphasis is especially important given the power and rigidity of racial classifications in the U.S. South.

Structural Explanations

In addition to school-based inequalities that disproportionately disadvantage African American students—such as academic tracking (Lucas, 1999; Lucas & Berends, 2007; Oakes, 1985) and the disproportionate disciplining of African American students (Monroe, 2005; Morris & Goldring, 1999)—schools and school systems in southern states, where most Black children attend school, continue to be funded at lower levels (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1994; Hedges, Laine, & Greenwald, 1994a, 1994b; Wenglinsky, 1997). These and other structural patterns have deleterious consequences for students' academic outcomes. It is not enough to investigate disparities in students' academic outcomes at the individual level alone. Rather, it is necessary to understand how the entire social structure of schooling shapes students' academic outcomes—across race, region, gender, and social class. Given African Americans' historical connection to the U.S. South, the recent surge in Black migration back to the area, and the increasing presence of Latino families and children in new geographical places such as Georgia and North Carolina (Beck & Allexaht-Snyder, 2002; Wortham, Murillo & Hamann, 2002), what do these geographical and socioeconomic patterns mean for racial patterns in housing and public school desegregation (see Boger & Orfield, 2005), as well as for how district resources will be controlled and distributed among a traditionally excluded groups? In addition, how might recent migration shifts, such as the dispersal of families and children from areas along the Gulf Coast affected by Hurricane Katrina, shape the discourse on Black academic achievement in the places where these migrants now live?

As we have articulated throughout this article, the U.S. South is an important but understudied region that is critical in any effort to understand the social, economic, and educational experiences and outcomes of Black students. We have noted how a deliberate focus on the U.S. South in contemporary empirical investigations of African American schooling can contribute to the scholarly community's understanding of the geography of opportunity (particularly the intersection of race and place) in relation to the academic achievement gap. We used U.S. census data to buttress these arguments regarding the presence of Black people in the South. We also provided empirically based research examples to illustrate how scholars' inattention to the nexus of race and place, and their omission of the South, despite its centrality in African American people's experiences, has led to a truncated understanding of Black academic achievement throughout the United States.

In presenting our research on issues of identity and achievement in a Black suburb in the South, we noted the potential for future investigations to move theoretical, scholarly, and policy discussion of the achievement gap forward by deliberately foregrounding the saliency of the South in shaping Black students' educational and social experiences, within the region and beyond. However, to achieve a robust theoretical and scholarly understanding of how the nexus of race and place shape Black identity and school achievement, it is necessary for universities and other research agencies situated within the region—and outside it—to recognize that the South is a critical geographical place in shaping the contemporary experiences of African American people

nationally, across a range of areas. The discourse on African Americans and the South should not be limited to historical understandings and associations.

Developing a more complicated understanding of the nexus of race, place, and African American identity and schooling will require the expertise and collaboration of scholars from many disciplines. It is not enough to look at a phenomenon such as the role of identity in influencing academic achievement disparities by interpreting the various factors associated with these disparities through single-disciplinary lenses such as education, sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology, or history. We urge the use of scholarly and conceptual frameworks and research teams that are interdisciplinary and multimethod in structure to enhance the means for capturing the multilayered nature of a complex issue such as Black identity and how it shapes academic achievement. Any scholarly endeavor operates under time and resource constraints, which limit researchers' opportunities to investigate phenomena exhaustively, but the scholarly community must note how the dynamics of race and place shape the interpretation of findings. A new emphasis on researching the U.S. South—and its influence beyond the region—will provide important scholarly insights and advance theoretical understandings of Black people's experiences in a range of areas.

Future researchers interested in Black student achievement, within and outside the South, are encouraged to ground their studies in comprehensive analyses of the social contexts in which student achievement occurs. For example, the historical trajectory and migration patterns behind the contemporary presence of Black people in various regions of the United States cannot be dismissed as insignificant. The South's distinction as the historical and contemporary place where most Black people reside, together with the "Return Black Migration" that is presently under way, highlight the region's pivotal role in shaping African American people's sense of identity and their overall social, political, economic, and educational experiences.

NOTES

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¹In general, the terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably in this article to refer to U.S.-based citizens of African descent whose ancestors were enslaved in the United States. In certain sections of the article, we specifically use the term *Black immigrants* when referring to foreign-born, first- or second-generation Black immigrants from areas such as the Caribbean and Africa. Black immigrants and their children constitute approximately 8% of the total Black population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

²We understand the need to trouble this notion of an achievement gap because it is an issue not necessarily of achievement per se but of historical inequities and denied opportunities to learn. This is part of what we discuss throughout this article. For other discussions on inequitable opportunities to learn, see Ladson-Billings (2006) and Anderson (2007).

³In a later section, we note how an understanding of the South has to consider historical, geographical, and sociocultural definitions of the region.

⁴Social scientists refer to many of the urban centers of the South and the Northeast as hypersegregated Black areas (see Wilkes & Iceland, 2004).

⁵These percentages are for Black or African Americans alone or in combination with other groups. For Black or African Americans alone, the percentages (from McKinnon, 2001) are as follows: Birmingham (73.5%); Jackson (70.6%); New Orleans (67.3%); Baltimore (64.3%); Atlanta (61.4%); Memphis (61.4%); Washington, D.C. (60.0%); and Richmond (57.2%).

⁶The only nonsouthern metropolitan areas with a population exceeding 100,000 where Black people comprised the majority were Gary, Indiana, which was 85.3% Black, and Detroit, Michigan, which was 82.8% Black (McKinnon, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Both of these industrial areas were once key destinations for Black migrants leaving the South during the Great Black Migration in the early-to-mid-20th century. Other nonsouthern cities with large Black populations include Chicago, Cleveland, Newark, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia, which were also destinations for Black migrants from the South during the Great Black Migration.

⁷We acknowledge that the present academic achievement gap is one in a series of “gaps” (e.g., literacy, elementary school attendance, high school completion rates) occurring at various times in the schooling experiences of African American people (see Anderson, 2007) and that it may be an outgrowth of such previous gaps. However, scholars, policy makers, and educators have expressed major concerns about the seemingly intractable nature of the Black–White achievement gap more than five decades after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, given that *Brown* was premised on the notion of equal educational opportunities for African American students.

⁸More than 50% of Hispanics and Latinos reside in the Southwest, and approximately 47% of Asian Americans reside in the western states, primarily California and Hawaii (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

⁹Although Black people’s experiences throughout the South have varied by locale, institutions such as the Black church tended to create an overarching Black experience and identity associated with the South (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Black churches, for instance, served as some of the first schools for Black people during and after slavery (Anderson, 1988; Bullock, 1967). Nowhere were these cultural and religious institutions as prevalent and influential as in the South.

¹⁰For a critical analysis of the disillusionment experienced by many African Americans who fled the South during the Great Migration when they made their way north, see Claude Brown’s (1965) classic, *Manchild in the Promised Land*. Instead of a promised land, Brown described how many African Americans met an urban wasteland in the North that was rife with poverty and racism.

¹¹For an earlier study of Black migration and settlement in the North, see W. E. B. Du Bois (1899), *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. In this book, Du Bois captured the migration of Black people from the U.S. South—only three decades removed from slavery and coming primarily from rural areas—and the resulting race and class dynamics in the city of Philadelphia.

¹²Historically, this hierarchical arrangement was codified in the three-fifths compromise in the U.S. Constitution, the emergence of Jim Crow Laws after the end of Reconstruction, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision in 1896, and the subsequent erecting of Whites-only and Colored-only public facilities throughout the South in the 19th and 20th centuries.

¹³Ogbu’s scholarship on cultural–ecological theory (1978, 1990, 1999) encompasses some of the most commonly cited reasons for underachievement among African Americans. Later scholars extended his work, particularly as related to the “acting White” hypothesis (Fordham, 1996) and racelessness as a strategy for school success (Fordham, 1988).

¹⁴We put quotations around “Black middle-class,” understanding the precariousness of the application of this term to African Americans.

Furthermore, class status for African Americans is ambiguous, especially when compared with class status for White Americans. Historically, within the African American community one might be considered middle class on the basis of status rather than income (see Frazier, 1957/1997; Patrillo-McCoy, 1999). Moreover, the relative wealth of U.S. Black households in comparison with U.S. White households further highlights how the inclusion of wealth complicates our understanding of class status in U.S. society. Black household median wealth in the United States is 14 times lower than White household median wealth (Kochhar, 2004). For an in-depth discussion on Black wealth and White wealth, see Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas Shapiro’s 1995 book *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*.

¹⁵Some of these Rust Belt cities were the final destinations for Black migrants during what is referred to as the Second Great Migration—which began around 1941 and lasted until 1970. By the end of that migration, African Americans had become primarily an urbanized people.

¹⁶Beyond moving back to the South, African Americans’ movement over the past three decades, in large measure, has been out of urban centers and into suburban communities. In 1970, 60% of African Americans lived in central cities, and 19% lived in suburban communities. In 2002, however, 51% of African Americans lived in metropolitan areas inside central cities, and 36% lived in the suburbs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002; also see U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, Table 5–1).

¹⁷In his book *Maggie’s American Dream* (1988), James P. Comer provides an example of a family history of Black migration from the U.S. South to the Midwest and of generational changes in educational attainment.

¹⁸See www.msanetword.org.

¹⁹For example, Ferguson’s examination of access to educational resources in the home (parents’ educational level, books, etc.) and school (teacher’s demand) revealed major distinctions between Black and White students. Across the 15 participating districts, White students were almost twice as likely as Black students to cite teacher demands as motivating them to “work really hard.” Moreover, 47% of the Black students responded that their parents had 16 years or more of schooling, in comparison with 80% of White students and 61% of Asian students.

²⁰The U.S. government sets the poverty line on the basis of what it costs families to have the beginnings—and only the beginnings—of the basic necessities of modern American life, such as food, shelter, clothing, health care, and transportation. Each year, the federal government calculates the minimum amount of money required by families to meet these basic needs. The resulting calculation is what is commonly referred to as the poverty line. For 2003, the government set the poverty guideline for a family of four at \$18,810 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004b).

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