THE CLASS WAR IN BLACK AMERICA

Unprecedented numbers of African-Americans are now in the middle class. And their influence is putting pressure on those who aren't moving up so quickly. ESSENCE examines how **class frictions** are separating communities, and asks the question, Why can't we all just get along?

LOSEVSKY PAVEL/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Michael Fletcher

Gladyse Taylor could feel the piercing glances from her new neighbors in the pricey condominiums across the street. To her, their eyes seemed to ask, Who is she? whenever they spotted her in front of her three-story graystone, the one she still describes as "a work in progress" 15 years after she moved in.

"Sometimes I'll be outside with a raggedy sweatshirt and my hair all over my head, but I'm just cleaning up my yard," Taylor says. "People who have lived in the neighborhood for a long time will come by and say hello." But not the new African-Americans who started moving into her neighborhood three years ago. "They have paid $250,000 to $350,000 for brand-new condos, and now they think they're the cat's meow," she says. "They have no idea who's inside these old homes that were here long before they even got here." ▷

"Nobody from this neighborhood is benefiting from the change. They take a lot and put a nine-unit building in with condos going for $300,000 each. Your taxes can go up, but that's it."

LELAND BOBBE/GETTY IMAGES

The tension Taylor describes, a product of her neighborhood's surge of new developments and renovations, isn't that unusual in this once-poor section of Chicago's South Side, or Black hubs such as Atlanta or Harlem, for that matter. As more Black professionals move into traditionally underserved areas looking for neighborhoods on the rise and city living, there is a growing gulf between the haves and the have-nots. "Maybe it's because of 'generational improvement,' " Taylor says. "They don't have any idea what their parents or grandparents lived through. I think you are supposed to come back and give, but not hold your nose in the air." She says these new neighbors don't try to get to know their own community. She proudly adds, "I haven't forgotten where I came from."

A WIDENING GULF

In some ways, the social and economic differences separating African-Americans in major urban centers like Chicago, Atlanta and Harlem are not unlike the disparities that have tested our interactions for generations. E. Franklin Frazier's controversial 1950's book, *Black Bourgeoisie*, argued that integration has torn the Black middle class from its traditional moorings, leaving it with no cultural roots in either the Black or White world.

30%

of African-Americans were considered middle class in 2005, with household incomes of $50,000 a year or better—an increase from 27% in 1990

The differences described by Frazier have only increased in the half-century since he wrote his book. In communities across the country, the gap between the working class and the middle class has grown wider than ever before. Even while a large number of African-Americans—almost one quarter, according to census statistics—remain mired in poverty, roughly 30 percent are considered middle class, with household incomes of $50,000 a year or better. While the rise of the Black middle class is a development that is celebrated, it's also one that has created an undercurrent of friction nationwide. "Class stratification within the race is worse than White racism," says Harold L. Lucas, president of the Black Metropolis Convention & Tourism Council in Chicago.

In Harlem the poor are being pushed out of brownstone apartments and tenement walk-ups that no one else wanted for decades. Replacing them is a new generation of African-American middle-class residents with the money to renovate, who are drawn by Harlem's prominent place in Black history and its proximity to the corporate offices downtown.

The infamous housing projects that once towered over Chicago's State Street just minutes south of the Loop are now mostly gone. Housing developments that shadowed fading neighborhoods closer to Lake Michigan have also been demolished, accelerating the transformation of Bronzeville, the historically Black South Side community that formerly abutted the projects. Now red-brick condominium buildings are being erected in long-empty lots next to stately three-story graystone mansions. As a result of this transformation, class wars once fought between Blacks and Whites have been replaced by conflicts in which the battle lines are drawn solely by us.

Gladys McKinney, a resident of the South Side since 1955, says she has seen her neighborhood go from upscale to run-down and back again in the past 50 years. Now retired after a long teaching career in Chicago's public schools, McKinney, 76, lives in public housing not far from scenic Lake Michigan.

"I have no problem with the new people," she says, explaining that she introduces herself to all the new residents and believes the neighborhood receives better services because the community is on the rise. But change hasn't been as easy for others. Newcomers grumbled about people sitting on the stoops, a behavior they associated with longtime residents. Loud music was also a problem. "It was a struggle," she says. "People were like, 'You're not going to come and take over.' "

Despite her welcoming attitude, McKinney, a community leader, has warned newcomers not to look down on those living in public housing, like herself: "I said, even though I'm in public housing, I am just as good as home owners paying thousands for their homes. This is nothing but brick and mortar. It's what you are on the inside as an individual, that's what counts."

Natascha Neptune, a 31-year-old engineer, recently bought an apartment in a new mixed-income development in Chicago. "They feel we think we're better and fuss over little things," she says of public-housing tenants in the building.

Does she think some of the problems are a result of two different classes of people living in the same building?

"Yes," she says with a sigh. "I guess they feel they don't have a choice in matters, but that's not the case."

Amina Green, a single mother who rents an apartment in the Kenwood area of Chicago, says many of the new people in her neighborhood seem uncomfortable with the longtime residents. "I remember being out talking to a friend who was working in the yard, and across the street in a new development someone was working in their yard. We said hello, but they would not speak. The same thing happens when they are out jogging or walking their dogs. They often just look away," Green says. "The new people have come in, but they have not exactly been neighbors. There seems to be a lot of discomfort."

Such resentment was muted in a bygone era when Black doctors, musicians and politicians lived on the same block or at least in the same communities with Black custodians, railroad workers and cooks. But integration has swept away many of the old boundaries, paving the way for the remarkable socioeconomic gains African-Americans have been making in recent decades. The percentage of Black households earning $100,000 a year or more has increased 50 percent since 1990 and sixfold since 1974.

Not only did income go up for many African-Americans, but increasing numbers of Black people also chose to live in the suburbs, putting physical distance between the affluent and the less prosperous. But with the rise of mixed-income living and the fact that more and more well-off Americans are returning to the cities, African-Americans are forced to live together again, a circumstance that has illuminated the divide.

25%

remained the poverty rate among Black Americans between 2004 and 2005. This is more than twice the national poverty rate of 12%

"What's happening is that people who have moved onward and upward don't really want to be reminded from whence they came,'' says Shirley J. Newsome, chairman of the North Kenwood-Oakland Conservation Community Council in Chicago. "They feel that if I can make it you should make it. And in many cases they were on the low end; they struggled; they went to school. It's almost like a feeling of resentment."

Before the revitalization in Chicago, Newsome explains, many of today's so-called lower-class Blacks were once considered middle class and looked down ▷

In the inner cities more than

50%

of all Black men do not finish high school

on people in public housing. "They were people of means—retired blue-collars," she says. "I warned them that at some point you are going to be 'those people.' And that is exactly what happened. Now the tables are being turned, and they are considered lower-income—just above the people in public housing."

The class wars currently going on among African-Americans can be very dangerous, says Michael Eric Dyson, professor and author of *Debating Race* (Perseus Book Group).

"All of this means that there is tremendous tension in Black America over the class struggle," he says, adding that these issues have always been there, but the difference is that Black Americans in the past—regardless of class—had more limits imposed on them.

However, Black Americans today, Dyson explains, are making more than ever before and their allegiances are increasingly focused on individual success, rather than on the success of the race.

"As the Black middle class moves back into the city, they may not have the same kind of racial solidarity or consciousness as they had before," he says, adding that class issues are being played out in the churches, in schools, in hip-hop and on television. He points to Bill Cosby's comments chastising poor Black Americans as a prime example of the tension.

The solution? "We must struggle for social justice for poor Black Americans while also using every resource in our fraternities and sororities and other charitable organizations to help them," says Dyson.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Doug McKeever is a real estate agent, and his wife, Susan Wright-McKeever is an airline employee. They and their two children moved into their new two-story home with a full basement about five years ago. Susan had grown up on the South Side and was happy to find a nice home back there. While they are concerned that the neighborhood is getting expensive for some, they count that as the price of progress. "It is difficult for a lot of the people here who operate on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder to adjust to the change," says Doug. "These prices are steep. The taxes are getting high. That is the negative side of a successful transformation."

Still, he says much of the housing built to replace the projects is desirable because it comes with new regulations requiring drug tests for residents and other screens for assurance. He believes this is necessary to make a neighborhood work when there are wide wealth and income gaps. "I understand that there is an undertone of people who question where this is going," he says.

Count Mary Bordelon as one who thinks the changes are doing little to lift the quality of life for long-standing residents like herself. Bordelon, who lives in a graystone that has been in her family for more than 50 years, watched her neighborhood deteriorate decades ago. She believes that government policies hastened the neighborhood's decline by tying up vacant lots and vacant homes for years while crowding public housing into the area. Even now, with things looking up economically, she is leery about who is profiting and about the long-term impact on the community. "Nobody from this neighborhood is benefiting from the change," she says. "They take a lot and put a nine-unit building in with condos going for $300,000 each. Your taxes can go up, but that's it."

Mary Pattillo, a Northwestern University researcher writing a book about the Black-to-Black transformation on the South Side, agrees that longtime residents are losing their grip in their own communities. "It's about who is going to own a neighborhood and its identity in the future,'' she says.

According to Newsome, there are already signs that working-class Blacks are losing the neighborhood's identity to more well-heeled brethren. In her own South Side community the new neighbors have tried to shut down a store that sold food by the case. It was a favorite of established residents who liked to buy in bulk for church functions or to save money. When it comes to parks programs, the old-timers are satisfied with swing sets and a basketball court, while the new arrivals demand miniature golf courses, tennis courts and swimming pools. "It is a difference in thinking. It is a difference in economics. It is a difference in class," explains Newsome. "It gets down to complaints about what is carried in the grocery store, how somebody walks her dog, or whether somebody blows his car horn too much."

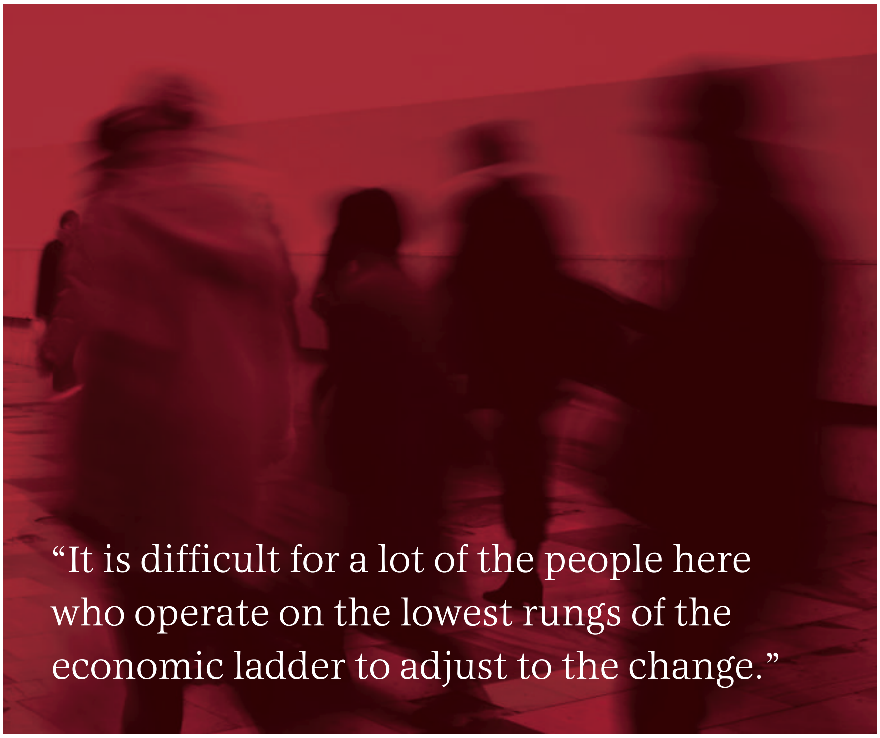
A DIFFERENT WORLD

The growing class divide can also engender subtle but serious tensions between families and friends, prompting feelings of isolation and guilt among those who made it, while breeding resentment and misunderstanding among those who have not.

17%

of African-Americans had completed college in 2005

Sharon Trenton's* Atlanta is the city that has earned a nationwide reputation as a Black middle-class mecca. It is a place of happy hours, tennis clubs and



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LOSEVSKY PAVEL/SHUTTERSTOCK

huge brick-fronted Colonials. Her Atlanta exists—often uneasily—next to another Atlanta. This city is also Black, but it is populated by working-class and poor people who live in sagging bungalows, shotgun houses and low-slung public-housing projects hiding in the shadows of the city. It can be glimpsed from the wide interstates leading to the wealthy Black suburbs, or it can be seen beyond the high fences restricting access to the Atlanta University Center, widely regarded as the country’s leading hub of Black higher education.

For Trenton, her move to the middle class has been a big part of her personal story. She grew up poor in Pinewood, South Carolina, where she had two younger half sisters she did not meet until her father’s funeral in 2003. By then, Trenton was a successful accountant with a master’s degree and a burgeoning career in Atlanta. As soon as she got together with her sisters, she quickly struck up a close relationship with them, but it is a relationship that has been marked by occasional class tension.

Trenton’s sisters did not go to college, and the women and their husbands struggle with the financial pressures of raising children and finding good work amid the limited opportunities available in small-town South Carolina. By contrast, Trenton, 40, is middle-class, divorced and has no children. She’s a serious tennis enthusiast who takes lessons and plays in tournaments around the Atlanta area while working to solidify her newly formed business renting tennis ball machines to players.

Trenton visits her sisters regularly in Pinewood and invites them to come to her suburban Atlanta home. At least on some level they seem to revel in her success. “I loved Sharon the first time I met her,” says one sister, a married mother of four whom Trenton asked not to be identified. “We hit it off right at first sight.” Of her sister’s middle-class life, she says, “It’s real good. She seems to have a good attitude with everything she does.” But one Christmas, after Trenton provided gifts for her nieces and nephews, one of her sisters asked, “Did you buy me an outfit?” And she did not sound as if she was kidding. That’s when Trenton set things straight. She was happy to buy gifts for the children, she said, but buying them for the adults was another matter altogether.

“I understand people sometimes think you have more money than you do,” Trenton says. “But I have bills and budgets and things that I need to spend my money on that are valid.”

WORKING IT OUT

Gladyse Taylor found a way to deal with the new “uppity” neighbors who watched her when she was working in her yard. Two years ago, as she prepared for her fiftieth-birthday bash, she envisioned her party as a serious throwdown, with nearly 200 guests and music pumping in the backyard well into the night. “I knew there wasn’t going to be any peace and quiet on the block that day,” she says with a laugh.

But she also knew that the new residents had no clue about how hard she and others had worked to bring the neighborhood to its current glory and saw them only as working-class hacks. She did not want them put off by her party, so she invited them—all of them. And they partied hard. “You could see that it just changed their mind-set,” says Taylor, who works for the Illinois state budget office. “Now when they see me, it’s like, ‘Hey, how are you?’ They don’t have that attitude anymore.” □

In major metropolitan areas, between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of Black people living in the suburbs jumped from 34 % to

39%

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***Name has been changed.**