

GROWING UP BLACK IN OAKVILLE

*The Impact of Community on Black Youth Identity
Formation and Civic Participation*

By Maureen Brown

In Partnership With

*The Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton
Halton Multicultural Council and Halton Social Planning Council*

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The findings and views of *Growing up Black in Oakville* reflect those of the researcher and the community partners, not necessarily those of the advisory committee.

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Word from the Community Partners

The Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton, Halton Multicultural Council and the Halton Social Planning Council are pleased to support this innovative exploration of black youth in our community entitled, *“Growing Up Black in Oakville: The Impact of Community on Identity Formation and Civic Participation.”*

This study grew out of concern about being diverse in Halton, and more particularly, in Oakville. Based in a community surrounding a large Canadian city, the study is unique. It represents a pioneering effort that will inform community, civil society and government as they move to redefine the meaning of social inclusion in demographically diverse communities.

We are all aware of the changing demographics of our community: more than 50% of new immigrants to Canada and two-thirds of those who come to Ontario settle in the Greater Toronto Area. Forty-three percent of residents in Mississauga are new immigrants, the bulk of whom come from the Middle East, Asia and the Caribbean. Halton is poised for similar demographic changes over the next 10 years.

The new make-up of our communities means that the cultural assumptions on which we have traditionally operated may need to be re-visited. In keeping with our commitment to creating inclusive communities, we have to decide if we need to do things any differently in order to enjoy maximum participation by all our citizens. We have to take deliberate steps to create common ground for all our citizens and, where necessary, hear from those who feel left out and misunderstood, despite assumptions that they are equal participants.

The study focuses and reports on how black youth in Oakville are fitting into their environment, and on how Halton and Oakville can draw them in as partners in its efforts to create a socially inclusive environment for all its people. Recommendations fall into specific categories relating to youth, black parents, governments and institutions. The study is based on multiple sources of data. Information was collected in focus groups with close to 60 randomly selected black youth in Oakville, ranging from 13-24 years.

The youth shared their feelings, experiences and perspectives with us. We also interviewed more than 20 parents, as well as community leaders and civic politicians, including Regional Chair Joyce Savoline and Oakville’s Mayor Ann Mulvale. We built our analysis on existing community-based research of Halton and Oakville as well as on academic research about the way communities form and how youth acquire a sense of ‘ownership’ in their community. An advisory committee of representatives of Halton-based agencies, institutions (such as school boards and police), youth and parents guided our work. Eminent York University professor, Dr. Carl James, an expert on the topic, advised the research process.

We feel that the results of the study will:

- i) help regional planners and service providers recognize the many dimensions of the youth they are serving and thus enrich their ability to serve them
- ii) generate discussion, introspection and decision-making in Oakville's black population as it seeks to encourage excellence and community participation among its youth; and,
- iii) raise awareness that will help to head off some of the divisive elements that so often mar communities that are in transition.

Above all, we believe that the study will contribute greatly to our understanding of how to encourage social and economic inclusion in our communities, particularly communities faced with major demographic changes.

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SECTION 1

Beginnings

- **Setting the Stage**
- **The Toronto Experiment**

Chapter 1 – Setting the Stage

The realization of what I had just undertaken hit after I interviewed Oakville's Mayor Ann Mulvale for *Growing up Black in Oakville*. Here I was asking the Mayor of one of Canada's wealthiest municipalities, a Town seen by outsiders as the seat of power, privilege and *whiteness*, how she would receive any evidence in this report that contradicted her vision of fairness, equity and inclusion in Oakville. Mayor Mulvale, respected and loved by her people (she is serving her fifth term as Mayor) had just finished painting a picture of Oakville as she saw it. As Mayor she makes it a "conscious focus not to compartmentalize" citizens by race, ethnicity and other outward characteristics, she said, noting, on the other hand that Town events such as Carousal (our version of Toronto's Caravan) and post-September 11 support from Muslim groups enrich Oakville's community spirit.

Citing her own British background, Mayor Ann (as she is fondly called in Oakville) decried communities where "lingering colonial clan systems" prevent people from bringing their talents and energy to the benefit of the community. "My job is to serve everybody", the Mayor said. "We are all made in the image of God". She added, "It's not the darkness that frightens us, it's our own light. We need to be inclusive."

Mayor Ann shared her own story as an immigrant to Canada and as an 'outsider' to Oakville, adding with a smile that even after 30 years in Oakville some still consider her a newcomer. She talked about her sons, now grown, attending White Oaks Secondary School. Today White Oaks is one of the most diverse in Oakville and the home of Halton's Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program. Growing up, she said, her sons had their share of being poached on by bullies in search of lunch money. Bullies actually hung one son up in a tree. Her children, she said, were the "runts of the class", thus, in the egalitarian world of the bully, prime targets for such shakedowns. Bullying exists in every school, Mayor Ann said, citing its cause as "power struggles of insecure people".

Mayor Ann's goal for Oakville is to create a community where people – all people – feel welcome, appreciated and respected.

That's when it struck me. I had no reason *not* to believe that all citizens of Oakville, regardless of color or background feel welcome, appreciated and respected. Certainly at least at the surface level all seems relatively well in terms of race relations. But what if after interviewing black youth, their families and a range of community organizations and representatives we found evidence to the contrary – that instead of feeling welcome, appreciated and respected, they are living lives marked by disrespect, alienation and lack of participation in the Oakville community? What if we found seeds of what, in some jurisdictions, is major discontentment with and disconnection from community foundations such as schools, law enforcement, civic services and religious organizations?

Given the different reactions I was already getting from youth and from leaders in these institutions, it would be difficult to report an Oakville of two solitudes – where interpretations of reality vary like night and day between black youth and the majority population. So I asked the question. It was a ‘what if’ question, designed to do two things (1) prepare the Mayor for the eventuality that the study yielded unexpected results and (2) to lay the foundation for openness in dealing with these results. Openness is the first step away from the denial that causes so much hurt in communities where those who complain of inequitable treatment are viewed as troublemakers, liars and ‘activists’—in the negative sense.

Mayor Ann paused and looked at me for a deliberate moment, then said in effect, ‘we welcome any information that will help us serve all our people better’. She expanded on this thought a few moments later after the official interview ended and as we walked towards the door. Yes, there is always the possibility that not everyone in Oakville is comfortable with the growing diversity of their Town and yes, some citizens, in this case people of color, could well be experiencing negative fallout from this discomfort. She reiterated that she would be open to any findings that would help to create a more inclusive community.

Probing into matters of race is an extremely sensitive, emotionally charged undertaking, especially given the climate of our times. The past year has delivered to our doorsteps September 11 and its aftermath, allegations of racial profiling by Toronto police and a sharp spike in the murder of black men by other black men, all of which has resurrected the old debate on links between race and crime. It has also raised questions about who is being ‘let into’ our country and by extension our communities and whether or not ‘they’ are here as productive citizens or as drains on our resources. Above all, are ‘they’ going to bring their old habits that will threaten the way we have come to define ourselves?

There are even more powerful, though little explored fall-outs from the conversation society is having about race. Seeking refuge from the negative stereotypes, portrayals and expectations of their children, black families are moving away from the temptations and barriers that they fear hinder their children’s success in the city, choosing instead to live in surrounding communities such as Oakville. They arrive with high hopes and assumptions that their children will be accepted at face value, will, in some cases, have a fresh start and in others, find social environments that are in keeping with their own values as parents. They expect that their youth will derive the benefits that others in the community seem to enjoy and that in their new surroundings, race will matter less than it did in the big city.

What these parents and the communities to which they move pay too little attention to, however, is the critical role that *identity* plays in determining the success of their children’s integration into their community of choice. The question of identity runs in two directions. The receiving communities, unless they are literally being created out of undeveloped land, have already established a definition of who they are. This definition typically does not include blacks—and other visible minority groups—as distinct social categories, mainly because they are usually present only in small numbers. Increasing numbers of black families therefore

presents them with the challenge of re-defining who they are from the perspective of race, ethnicity, in some cases economics, expectations of civic participation, social priorities and values. For community leaders, institutions and agencies, it is a choice between 'not seeing race' and proceeding with business as usual; and, acknowledging the implications of a new set of community dynamics then finding ways of re-creating their identity to fit the new reality.

The young blacks that move to these communities with their parents are also faced with a challenge of identity. Like other youth they are on a journey of self-discovery and self-definition. The way youth define themselves flows from various social designations, such as race, class, gender, family relationships and religion. The designations with the greatest influence are those that enable the young person to successfully navigate the social context within which they are growing up. But what happens when the social context is permeated with ready-made images of what that young person is expected to be? The young person is then faced with the challenge of adopting these socially constructed definitions of who he is, or defining himself in ways that defy social expectations.

The result, social scientists say, is a kind of 'identity crisis', which, resolved properly, paves the way for young person to become healthy and active participants in their community. Handled incorrectly, though, 'identity crisis' produces youth who, in the words of one researcher, find themselves in a "social pocket" from which they find it difficult to break free. Or from which they seek their freedom in ways that may not be socially acceptable. In our society race is one of the most prevalent ways of socially designating people. It is also a prevalent basis on which people find themselves in 'social pockets'.

The implications of a young person's race takes on different meanings, depending on the community in which they are growing up – or so one would expect. A black youth who is a member of a black family living among its socioeconomic equals and attending the same school as his neighbors and wearing the same name-brand clothing, should be expected to view the world through a similar set of lenses. Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect that members of the community will regard the black youth with the same blend of longsuffering, hope and patience or impatience with his shenanigans. After all, young people are our future.

What we find in *Growing up Black in Oakville*, however, is evidence that the relationship between the black youth and his community, in this case a community whose values were well formed before his arrival, is a more delicate and complex dance. He negotiates a fine line between parental values that in some ways mirror those of the community, but in others depart dramatically and his own need for social validation with that of a community that at best seems unprepared for him. In short, he faces a unique challenge that flows from being black in a predominantly white world.

The new 'old' communities into which black families are moving usually adopt one of two attitudes towards the changing face of their society. Some – the minority – begin to plan for the outcomes that have become almost inevitable when communities suddenly become more

racially diverse. They begin to review school programming to ensure that it connects to the community as it really is, rather than as it was decades ago. They review civic policies, community-based activities and hiring practices. They develop strategies and public events to encourage positive attitudes towards diversity. Others choose to deny that changing demographics will have any unusual effects on their lives and resist any implications that it might.

Communities like Oakville tend to adopt a 'loving family' approach to diversity. They acknowledge the growing diversity and may even review the way they do things to ensure that they are being just and fair. But this is often done not really expecting any major flaws in the way they are: after all, they are fair and they don't make distinctions among their people. They see themselves the way good families do towards their children—they dole out love, discipline and rewards in equal measure. Surely their children will grow up to be good, honest, upright adults as a result of their upbringing.

But as with good, honest families, however, there are often children – at least one child – that do not grow up according to the vision of the parents. Their deviation from what is expected may not necessarily be negative. It may be the child with artistic leanings in a family of scientists and mathematicians. Or the child who chooses a school other than that attended by three generations of his family. Sadly, it may be the child who in society's terms 'goes bad', engaging in rebellious, anti-social behavior that might even result in incarceration.

What happened, the parents ask. We gave them everything, just like their siblings. We did not show favorites. The parents' journey of understanding, accepting and eventually reconciling themselves with their children's 'distinctness' might be a fitting analogy of the journey that lies ahead for Oakville and communities like it. They face the pain of listening to their children share feelings that have remained long hidden, pain that is all the more intense to both the child and the parents, given the efforts that have been made to treat the child equally.

The problem though may be that the efforts were the parents' view of what was best for the child, made without the child's input or without consideration of the child's uniqueness. It may have been the parents' refusal-- probably fueled by fear of what the neighbors will think-- to face the reality that their child was 'different'. Or it may even be that having accepted that the child is 'different' in one area, the parents assumed he was different in all areas, treated him with kid gloves and robbed him of the normal interaction with his siblings.

The Toronto Experiment

Oakville's challenge of re-defining itself as a diverse community is also the challenge of many black parents living in the Town. It is also my challenge as the mother of two teenagers and one soon-to-be teenager. Ironically, this study in essence began the day I had my own encounter with the impact of my children growing up in Oakville. It began when my daughter – now attending university – began to experience a vague, undefined feeling that something was missing in her experience as a black girl, then 13. At first, it was in the little comments about her body shape and features and then about those of her (white) peers. Why couldn't she comb her hair *that way*? Why couldn't she wear certain clothes? Was she pretty? Why did she have to explain for the hundredth time that no, her hair did not grow overnight from six inches to 16 inches, that she was wearing extensions? Why did she have to defend her use of extensions to those who accused her of wearing 'fake' hair? How would they understand that among black women, wearing braids is not an attempt to be fake, rather like the singer Brandy, it was a fashion statement, a way of 'resting' her hair from chemicals or simply for fashion versatility?

Over the next few months, my daughter's questions about herself began to take on echoes of extreme self-consciousness. She questioned the music she listened to, her lack of friends at church, the seeming naivete of the children around her about racial issues. At first I reacted to my daughter's questions and comments like any other enlightened parent. Don't take questions about your hair and body shape personally. People around you may be curious, but they are not hostile. They may actually be wishing secretly that they could have a permanent tan or versatile hair. You are a beautiful young lady, be yourself, etc., etc., etc. After all, my daughter had been brought up with the best we could give her. As a long-time professional in diversity issues I had given her all the right books to read. Her hero was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I had exposed her to black poetry, images and films and of course, to the rich texture of my own Caribbean heritage. She was attending a prestigious private school where any kind of racist behavior would be summarily dealt with. She was smart, well spoken and already well respected by her teachers, her friends and their parents.

My daughter's uneasiness about her identity however, did not diminish. It increased. So I made a decision that as they say seemed like a good idea at the time, but which proved to be disastrous. I took her back to Toronto every weekend to attend a black church. After all, I had spent most of my young adult years as a new immigrant to Canada in black, predominantly Caribbean churches. I remembered the camaraderie I had with other young

people whose backgrounds were similar to mine. I had no identity crisis. I came from Jamaica at 17, my identity fully established. Even when for three years I attended a predominantly white church, there were enough people with similar backgrounds to mine that I was able to have both black friends and white friends. The whites were mainly from Newfoundland and we used to joke about being 'island people'. There were certainly many similarities in the way we viewed our world.

I reasoned that my daughter would identify with the beautiful, young, career-oriented black women she encountered at the Toronto church. I thought she would finally be able to share the 'other' side of her that she had to keep under wraps in Oakville: the refusal to go swimming unless her hair was in braids – who wants to spend another \$40 at the hairdresser? The lament about 'African' hips, while secretly delighting in their sensuous appeal. Appreciation for the many strands of a common history. I even remember taking her to meet a beautiful older Ghanaian woman at church, whom I especially admired. She had eight children and was by North American standards voluptuous. But her sensual appeal, her smooth dark skin and the way she walked – strong, graceful, assured – made me say to my daughter in her presence, "This is what we want to look like when we are her age".

The Toronto Experiment was a disaster. My daughter, and after a long time I, realized that a huge 'cultural' gap existed between her and the young people with whom she was attempting to identify. Some jibed her gently as being "too Oakville". (She had yet to truly appreciate the nuances of Caribbean humor!) She was not used to the kind of hip-hop gospel music that was de rigueur with young church-going blacks. She could not do the BET-type dance moves that were so integral to the worship at that church. She felt out of step, out of tune and frankly rejected by the young people we hoped would have embraced her as a young sister from the suburbs.

My daughter went into a personal crisis of self-doubt, battered self-esteem and extreme feelings of alienation from both Oakville and Toronto black culture as she was experiencing it. I must say that I too went into crisis. All the arguments I had used for teaching children to value themselves and to interact with their surroundings with dignity, pride and strong definition of themselves as young blacks seemed useless in the face of my daughter's pain. I spent many hours talking to and reasoning with her, watching helplessly as she lay across my bed crying. The fact that she had a solid group of girlfriends from school, friends who loved her, did not seem to fill the void she was feeling. She thought that as one of the few black girls in her surroundings, she could not possibly say how she felt when friends laughingly teased her about her 'ghetto booty' (hip-hop culture slang for, let's just say well-shaped buttocks!) She could not explain how insulted she felt when, after dressing like a 'ghetto queen' in one costume night at school, her peers urged her to dress that way more often. "You look so great!" they gushed over and over. My daughter is a Chanel type of girl. How could she voice her uneasiness over their apparent comfort with her 'ghetto queen' stereotype, gushing in ways they never did over her 'Oakville conservative' persona?

Is It Because I'm Black, or Because I'm Young?

My daughter's quest sent me on my own quest to see how black youth identity was being affected by living in Oakville. Was there something about living in this community that plunged young blacks into an identity crisis that was unique to them? Or were black youth, with an additional filter of race, simply going through what every other youth was going through? How important was the issue of race anyway? I spoke to friends who are parents of teenage children. Some said their children identified with and frequented places like Scarborough, Rexdale and even their parents' Caribbean homelands (although in the case of the Caribbean not very Saturday night!) Others said their children cobble together their own *posse* (a tight social group) often including other visible minority youth and even the odd white teen. I asked them if their children are shunning what has become accepted as Oakville's cultural framework and thus forfeiting their chance of being true participants in building Oakville's future? Is Oakville reaping the benefits of their talent, time and resources, or is it merely the place from which they exodus at every opportunity? We interviewed some of these parents for *Growing up Black in Oakville*.

Rick MacDonald, Superintendent of (North Halton) School Services in the Halton Roman Catholic School Board and a member of the study's Advisory Committee put his finger on the challenge that lay ahead as he left the first meeting of the Committee. "The challenge" he said, "will be to suss out from the experiences youth are having, [those] that are due to their being black and those that are simply the result of being teenagers." Mayor Ann put it another way in a rhetorical question she asked during my interview with her. "Is there a real [race] problem here? Or are problems being used as an excuse for not achieving [personal goals]?"

Growing Up Black in Oakville tries to answer at least some of these questions. It is important to note, however, that we may never be able to tell in some cases whether a particular treatment directed at a black teen, the way the teen responds to the treatment or the way the powers that be handle the situation is directly affected by race. Who knows why a small boy, who joined the class after migrating with his parents from Kenya was immediately picked on by others, all of whom happen to be white? Is it because of his height? His accent? His hesitation in joining social circles because he is still trying to figure out how social circles work in Canada? Because he is a newcomer? Because he is black? Because he is *dark-skinned* black? The possibilities are endless.

The difficulty in answering these questions with scientific precision leads some to avoid facing the reality of the experiences that black youth are having in Canadian communities and the way these communities are impacting the youth. They prefer instead to write these accounts off as over-reaction. Others interpret these experiences in ways that most closely match their own experiences growing up. Or the experiences of their children. So if kids picked on them because they had freckles, or big ears or because they were poor, they say that black youth are being picked on for reasons other than race. Or even if race is acknowledged as a factor, it

falls in the same boat as big ears, freckles and uncool clothes. Interestingly, when this question was put to one of the focus group members she retorted. “Being black is who I am. It’s not a quality about me.” In other words, the impact does not wear off as easily.

Another reaction of course, is to conclude that just about every act of harassment, rejection or over-attention by teachers, police officers and neighbors is race-based. This too is not necessarily so. Many in the study caution against seeing a shadow behind every tree—in other words, racism in every action directed toward them. Doing so, they say, traps youth in an endless cycle of self-doubt and social alienation, causing them to miss out on opportunities to contribute meaningfully to society and saddling them with the dreaded ‘chip on the shoulder’.

Growing up Black in Oakville does not pretend to answer all the questions we have around race and the way it impacts black youth’s self-definition and levels of community participation. What it does do is give voice to the youth themselves. We listen to their stories and we seek their interpretation of their experiences. We hear the perspectives of those charged with shaping their young lives, whether their parents, civic officials or part-time employers. But we don’t stop there. We visit, through research, how challenges similar to theirs have been or are being addressed in other communities. We marvel at some of the consistencies and take note of where the Oakville experience departs from that of other jurisdictions. We present the voices of black youth against the backdrop of the natural evolution of communities, also explored through research.

Growing up Black in Oakville is a wake-up call not only for Oakville, but for any community that is in transition from an established, well defined identity to one that must be re-shaped by demographic shifts. The process does not have to be a negative one. It will, however, require openness, stretching and compromise on all sides. The question for Oakville is, having taken the first step, are we ready to go the distance?

Chapter 2 – A Course Set By History: Understanding Oakville

Every community has its origins, folklore and residential patterns that shape the way it develops. Some communities remain heavily influenced by their past, while others move away from it, often as a result of factors such as demographic shifts, changes in economic status, external political decisions and local political choices. Oakville has become defined by its consistent ranking as one of Canada's three wealthiest communities. But Oakville is not just a collection of estates on the shores of Lake Ontario. It is a living, breathing community whose culture, values and even physical layout are closely tied to its history, a history that practically pre-destined it to be a town of above average wealth and lifestyle.

The Town began in 1827 at the mouth of Sixteen Mile Creek and Lake Ontario, when a wealthy merchant, shipbuilder and exporter, William Chisholm, spied the property during his trips between Burlington, where he lived and Toronto, where he did business. Chisholm saw the commercial potential of Oakville as a harbor and source of timber. He also dreamed of building a town in support of his business. In 1834 he moved his business from Burlington and Toronto and consolidated it in what later became known as Oakville. That year Oakville became a port of entry for immigrants to Upper Canada – at the time mostly British, Irish and Scottish—and the population of what was essentially a village began to grow.

Over the course of the next century, Oakville's status as a shipping town grew, as did businesses in support of the shipping industry and the people who ran it. Unlike Hamilton and Toronto the Town never became an industrial centre though. Its commercial activities included tannery, carriage construction, lumber mills, fruit farming, canning, shipbuilding, skilled trades and grain exporting. Wealthy members of the landed and business class maintained summer homes on large, sprawling Lakeshore estates, but continued to live and do business in Toronto.

The demographic composition of the new town shaped the lifestyle that its citizens enjoyed. As in Toronto, Oakville's fashion and home décor mimicked the graces of Victorian living and entertaining. The Town was defined by an urban middle to upper class lifestyle, made possible by successful business enterprise and the sheer beauty of its location.

A Refuge for Ex-Slaves

In 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law made it illegal for American slave owners to pursue runaway slaves on Canadian soil and Canada's reputation grew as the Underground Railroad's North Star. Thanks to its harbor and proximity to the US border, many former slaves made Oakville their port of call and some chose to settle here, as ship captains and white Oakville residents helped to transport and hide them. Among prominent black families were the Johnsons, the Wallaces, William Holland and the Duncans. James Wesley Hill sent his first earnings back to

his former owner in purchase of his freedom and later bought property around the Ninth Line area. He was active in the Underground Railroad.

Escapee Samuel Adams, a blacksmith, became one of Oakville's outstanding citizens. With his son Jeremiah, Adams built the present Turner Chapel, which was then a branch of the American Methodist Episcopal Church. Adams eventually became a wealthy man through his patented invention of a machine that lifted flat construction stones from the lakebed. His great-grandson Alvin Duncan, a World War I veteran, lives in Oakville as one of the Town's most respected citizens.

John Cosley was another successful black resident and former slave. Cosley invented a kind of hand-held double-sided printing press, with which he printed his newspaper, *The Bee*. *The Bee*, with its sharp, down-to-earth reporting was well respected, prompting a rival newspaper in Milton to describe Cosley as "a genius in his way". Cosley's business card reportedly listed his pursuits as barber, gunsmith and 'proprietor of Indian root, shrubs and toys'. Cosley invented a patented breach-loading rifle and a combination watering and feed trough that could be folded up and placed under carriage seats. During the 1860s he was forced to close *The Bee* after he wrote articles that insulted local figures.

Ford Arrives

The Ford Assembly Plant arrived in Oakville in the 1950s and along with it came a new spate of residents and of businesses catering to the automotive industry. The Town's population grew from 13,000 in 1950 to 40,000 in 1960. During the previous decades the Town had been the beneficiary of expanding transportation routes and the new highway that facilitated the automotive industry was no different. Town planners restricted the highways to the then outskirts of the town, reserving the southern and western areas for residential housing, which by the 1960s had expanded to accommodate those coming in search of work at the Ford plant.

The Ford plant diversified the socio-economic profile of Oakville residents. Of course the newcomers, some of whom were black, enjoyed above average incomes, allowing them to purchase homes on the outskirts of the wealthy estates and in other parts of the growing Town. Over time, Oakville developed a reputation as a quiet, peaceful, beautiful place in which to raise families and attracted people from diverse backgrounds.¹

¹ Material for the historical account compiled from *Oakville and the Sixteen: The History of an Ontario Port*, U of T Press, Toronto, 1953 and *Oakville Then and Now: The Oakville Book*, Sheila Creighton, Rubicon Press, Oakville, 1993

A Place to Live, Work and Raise Families

Oakville's history generated several features of the Town that form the context within which black youth are coming of age:

- The genteel 'flavor' of the Town was set by its wealthy, upper middle class WASP founders;
- High real estate prices favored those who could afford to live in or around these estates as the town grew;
- The Town developed a unique identity relative to Hamilton, known as Steel Town; Burlington, probably viewed as a country cousin of sorts; and Toronto, the place many of the Town's residents made their wealth but where over time they chose not to reside;
- Although descendants of black slaves and later black families of Canadian descent lived Oakville in the early years, their numbers were never enough to create a distinct 'black community'. Instead, like many of those who make up the Town's 140,000 residents, most black families came in search of a good environment in which to raise their families and, in some cases, to live the lifestyle to which they were accustomed in their homelands.

The features that made the Town of Oakville attractive to its early inhabitants still attract families from around the GTA, Canada and the world. Beautiful public gardens, most notably Gairloch; waterfront trails; a quaint, historic downtown core; harbors; pretty shops, stores and restaurants make for a pleasant, family-friendly environment. Oakville is also attractive because of its amenities. Appreciation for these amenities is not lost even on the most jaded black youth.

Perhaps one of the most interesting features of Oakville, at least to parents, is that it is a sustainable community that remains connected to the hub of the GTA economic development, while maintaining its own growing industrial, retail, manufacturing and service sector. Oakville is not a suburb of Toronto. The Town nurtures its own development through initiatives such as its Technology Transfer Centre, a business incubator developed jointly with Sheridan College for assisting with start-up of high-tech companies² Thanks to its active promotion as a good place to do business, in 2001 the Economic Development Alliance (OEDA) alone responded to 3,763 business inquiries and facilitated the establishment of 21 investment projects, which accounted for close to \$300,000 of the more than \$500,000 new property taxes generated. In 2001, construction activity by companies such as Ford, Cadbury Chocolate, Wiberg Corp. and Algonquin Power added more than a million sq. ft. of new space in office, hotel, schools and other facilities.

² OEDA Annual Report, "*Setting a Course for Success*", 2001

The total value of commercial, industrial and institutional construction was more than \$82 million. Housing starts in Oakville have added another dimension to the growth of the Town, as have new or expanded highways and commuter transportation.

Changing Faces

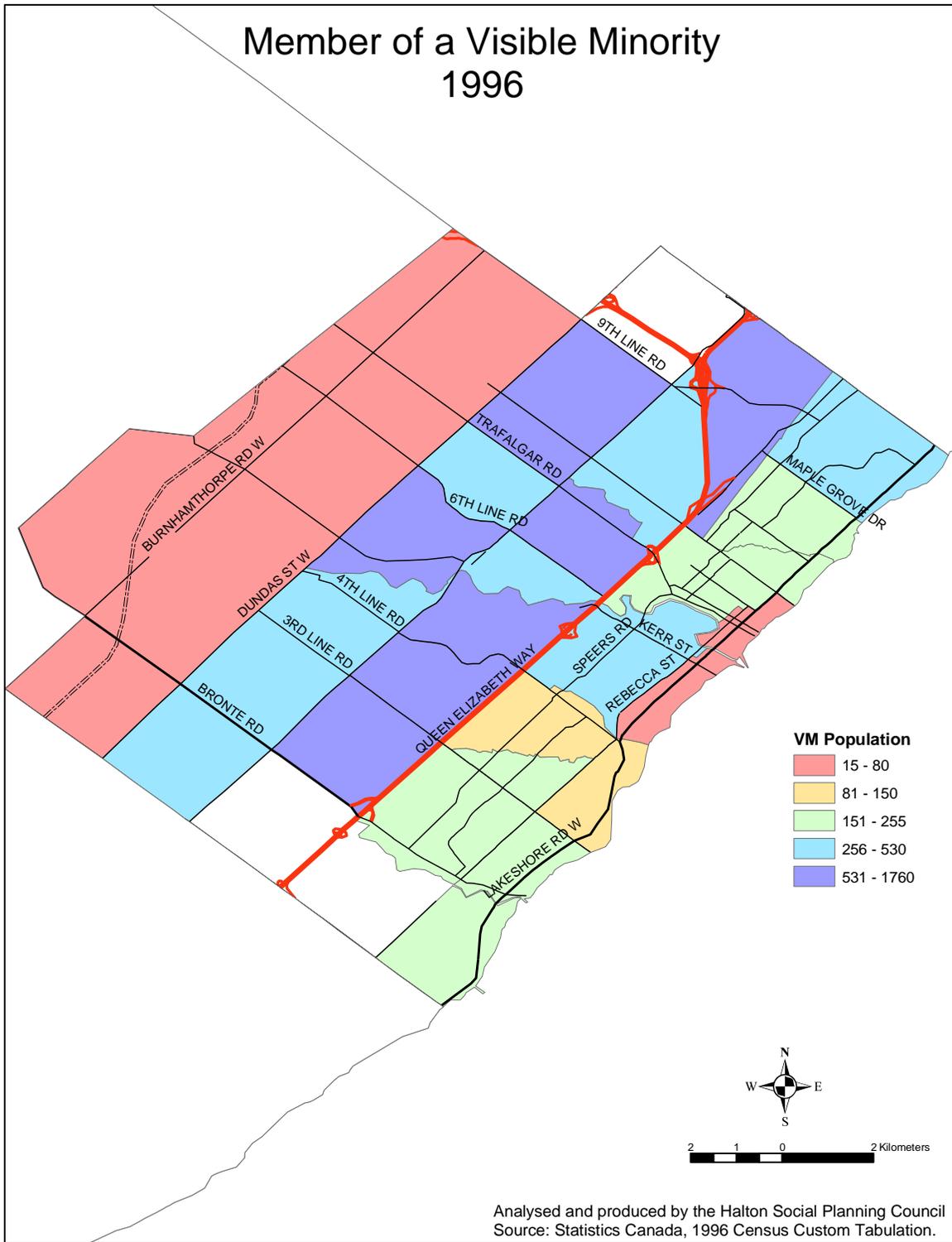
Drawn by the favorable combination of location, amenities, community flavor and business opportunities, more than 40,000 new residents made Oakville home between 1986 and 1996, bringing the population from 87,000 to 128,000, a growth of 47%. The sources of the new population signaled the first step in the Town's gradual transformation into a more racially and economically diverse community.

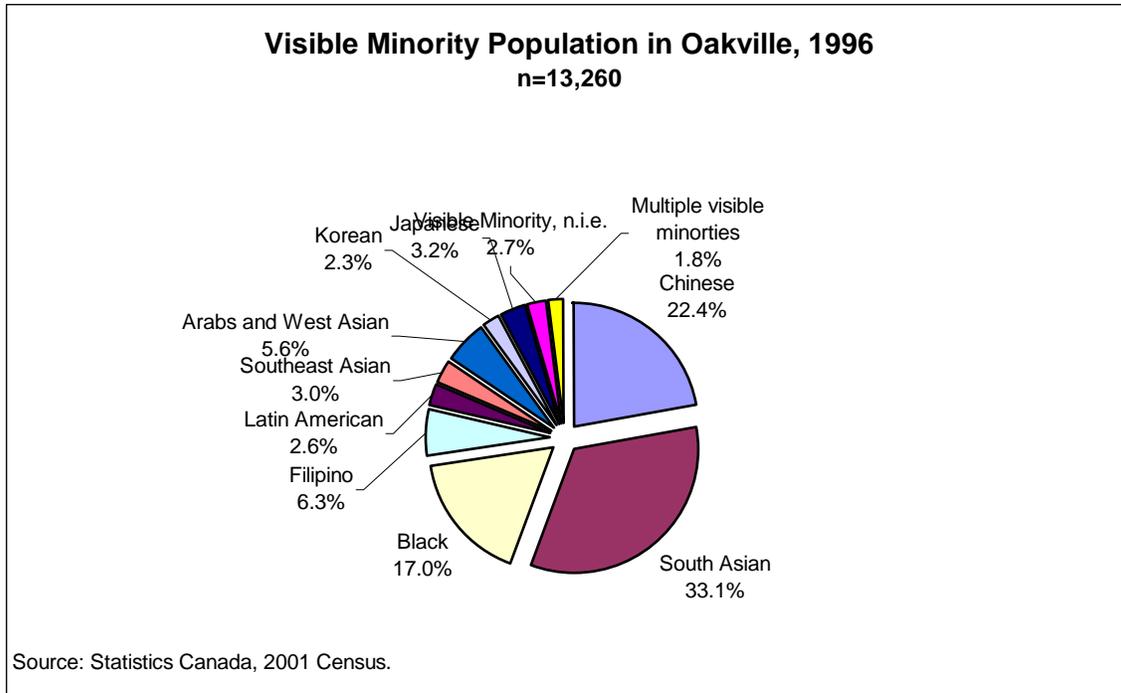
- 1) During this period Oakville's share of the Region of Halton's population increased by 5%, while that of the other municipalities declined. Oakville is expected to hit the 200,000 population mark by 2015.
- 2) 1996 census showed that the Chinese population had increased 29% over the previous 10 years; Polish 28%; Italian 23%; Portuguese 5% and East Indian 11%. Those who identified as English, Scottish and Irish dropped by 32%. (It is possible that some members of those groups chose to identify as 'Canadian', a new category introduced in the 1996 census). The largest visible minority populations were South Asian, Chinese and Blacks.
- 3) In its 2000 report, "*A Social Profile of the Halton Visible Minority Population*", the Halton Social Planning Council and Volunteer Centre found that "the visible minority population of Halton is disproportionately located in Oakville." The Oakville share of the Region's population is 37.9%, while its visible minority population constitutes 60% of the total in the Region, or 10% of its total population.
- 4) Blacks are the third largest visible minority group in Oakville. Fifth per cent of black youth are under 15 and are likely to be Canadian born. Their parents are likely Canadian born or immigrated to Canada before 1980.

The Report goes on to state that the Halton visible minority population mirrors the Halton's non-visible minority populations in demographic and socio-economic characteristics. "Both populations are well educated, likely to be employed and have higher than average income. It is this population that can afford to live in Halton, with its relatively high housing and transportation costs."²

² *A Social Profile of the Halton Visible Minority Population*, Halton Social Planning Council, December 2000.

Member of a Visible Minority 1996





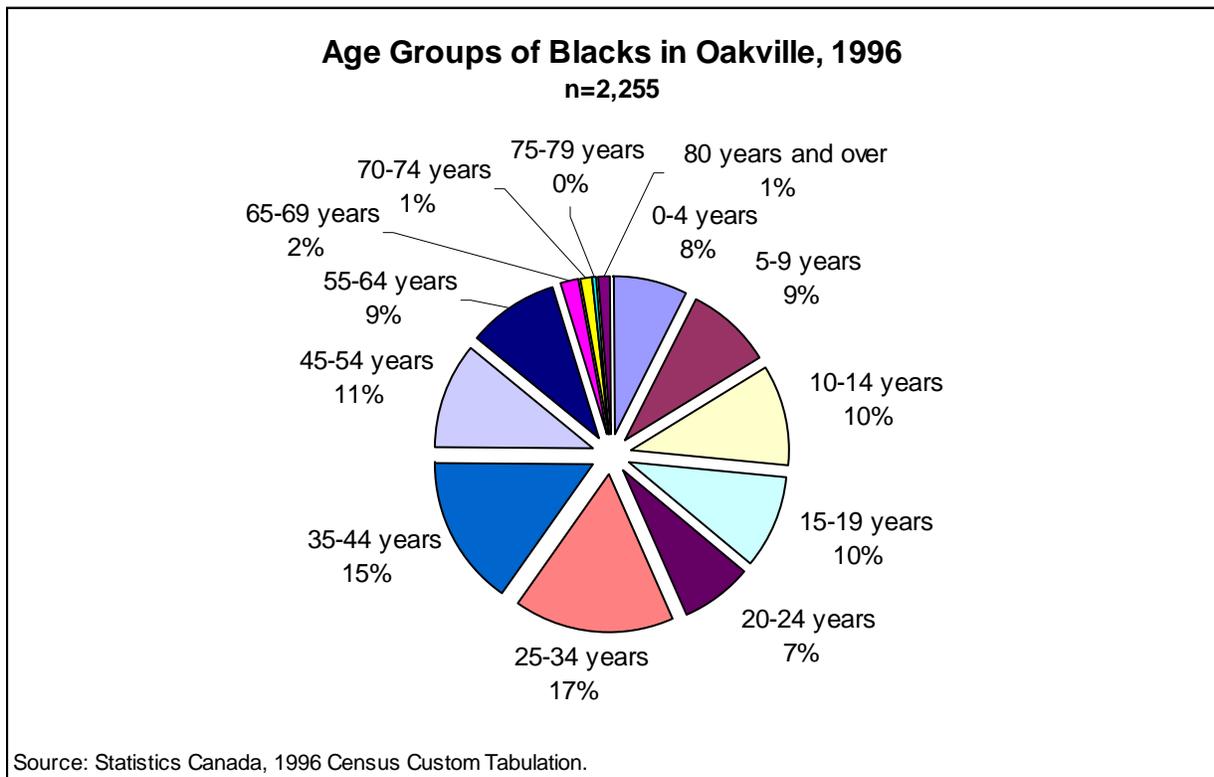
Although blacks are the third largest visible minority group in Oakville, the evolution in the Town's demographics is important in putting the identity formation process among black youth and its implications in perspective.

- i) The majority of black parents of Oakville youth are not newcomers to Canada or to Halton. They are well familiar with the norms, values and social expectations of the communities in which they choose to settle.
- ii) Of those families moving into Oakville, most come because they share at least some elements of the Town's middle-class values, which is why they have moved or relocated to Oakville. This observation is supported through parent responses in the focus groups,
- iii) The pressure that is being placed on Oakville to re-define its identity and its understanding of community values is coming not only from the black community, but also from the inevitable diversity of its growing population.

The black population grew from 2,255 persons in 1996 to 2,770 persons in 2001, a 23% increase. However, while the Black population decreased in terms of its share of the visible minority population in Oakville from 17% to nearly 15%, it is still the third largest visible minority group in Oakville.

Within the Oakville black population, 27% are under the age of 15 and another 17% are aged 15-24. There are few Black seniors in Oakville, as they constitute only 4% of the total black population. This indicates that the black population in Oakville is comprised of younger people. Within Halton, Oakville has the lowest proportion of visible minority young people

under 15 years at 23.8%, approximately the same proportion of the non visible minority population under 15 in Oakville, at 22.2%.

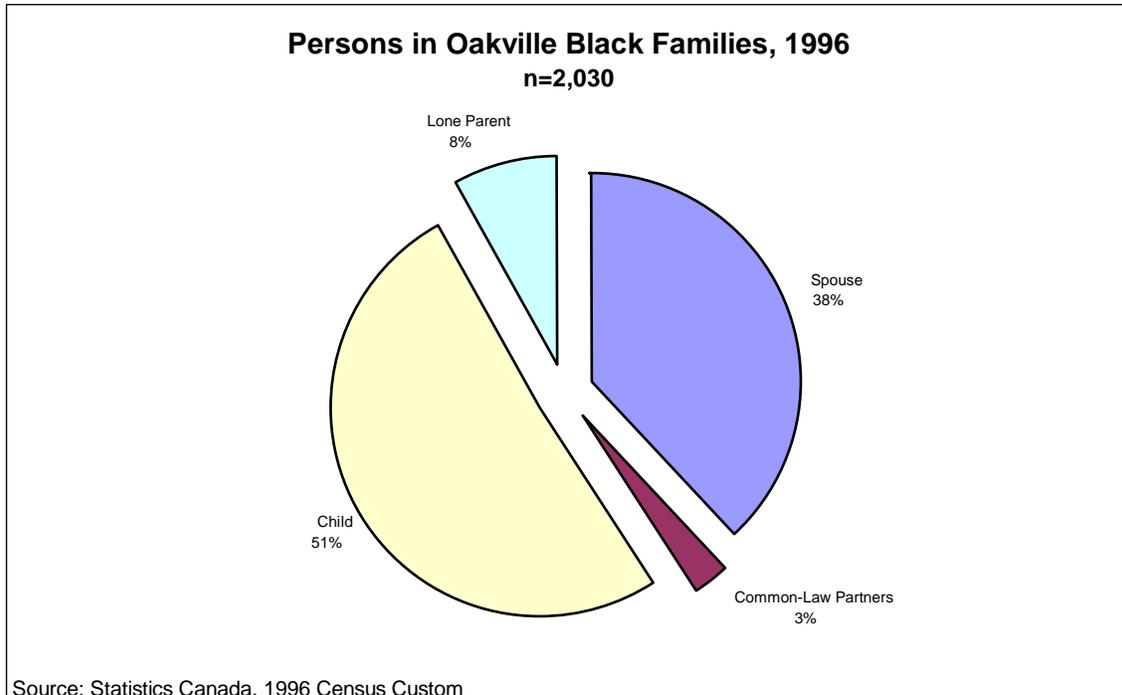


Family Structure

The family structure of Black families in Oakville in 1996 was such that the size of the family unit was quite evenly distributed. The highest percentage of families was either 2 person families or 4 person families.

In terms of family composition, slightly more than half of the persons in families consist of children. There are 165 lone parents that make up 8% of the persons in black families, compared to 3% for all of Oakville families.

The average family income of Oakville Black families in 1995 was \$61,848 compared to the average Black family income in Ontario of \$39,959. The average family income in Oakville is \$73,997 compared to the Ontario average family income of \$45,557.



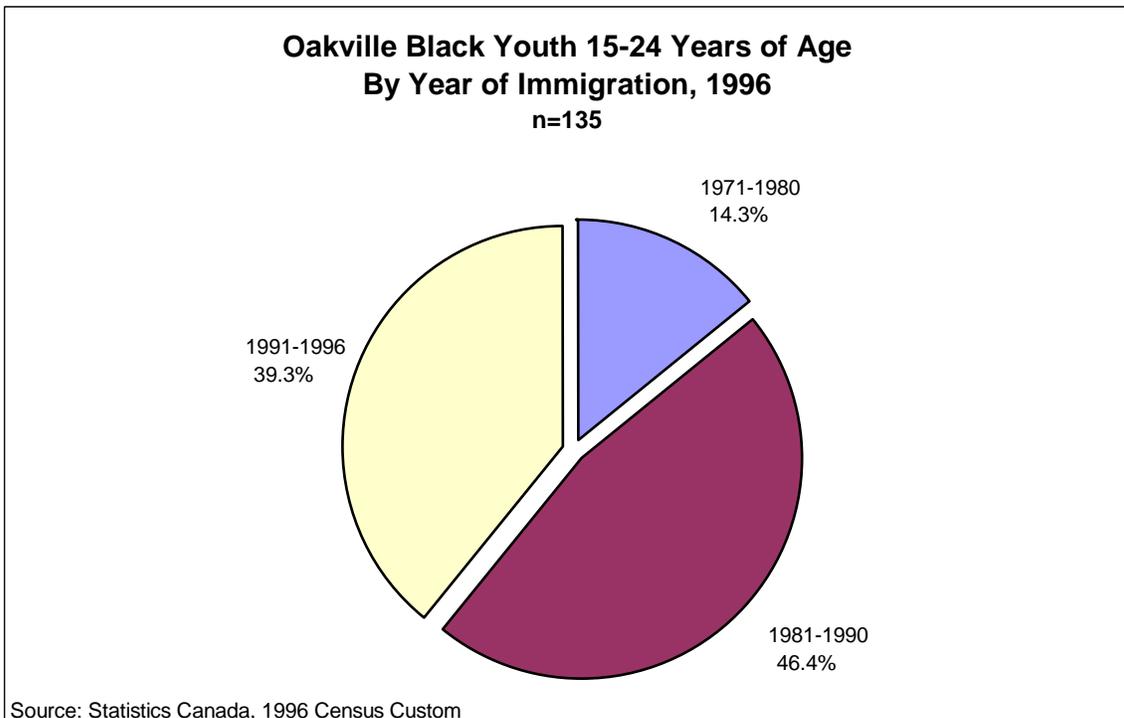
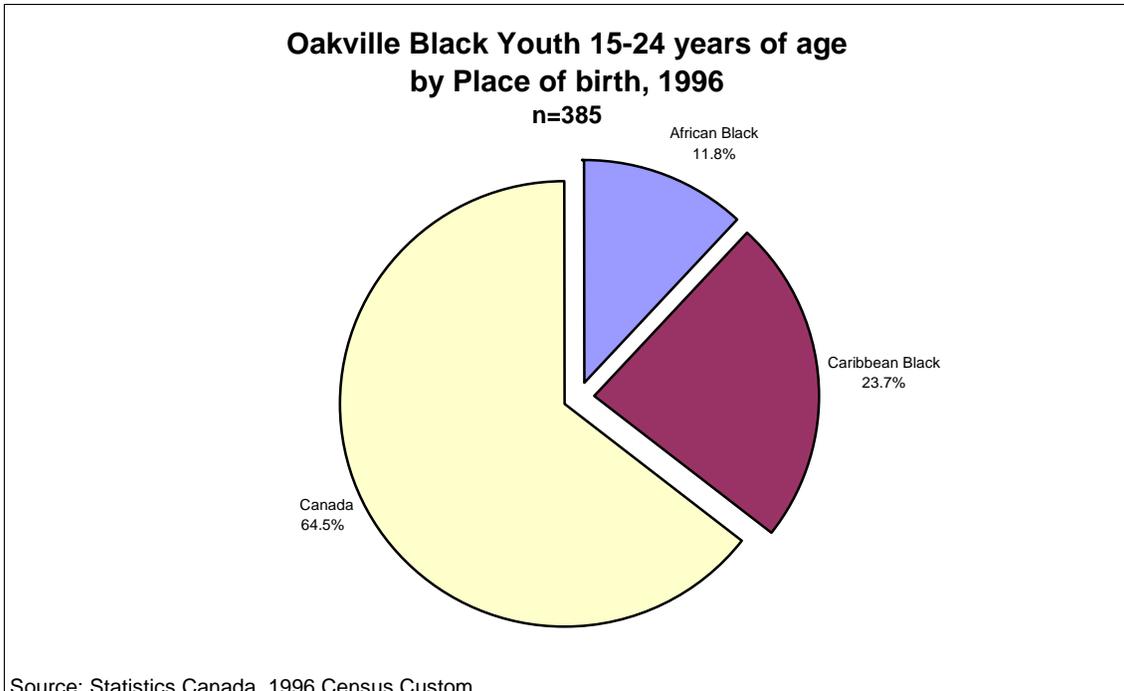
Black Youth

According to 1996 Census data, there were a total of 1,665 blacks aged 15 years of age and older residing in Oakville. Of those, 380 (23%) were aged 15 to 24 years of age. Within the black youth population, 220 (58%) are aged 15-19 and 160 (42%) are aged 20-24.

Within the black youth population, the gender mix is nearly equal. There are slightly more males than females in the 15-19 age group and just the opposite in the 20-24 age group.

English Language Capacity

Of the black youth aged 15-24 in Oakville, 50 (13%) did not speak English or French at home. All of these youth were African blacks .



Period of Immigration

Of the 380 Black youth, 135 (36%) or 1 in 3 were not Canadian born. Of those, 20 (14.3%) arrived between 1971-1980, 65 (46.4%) arrived between 1981 and 1990 and 55 (39.3%) arrived between 1991 and 1996 (See figure below).

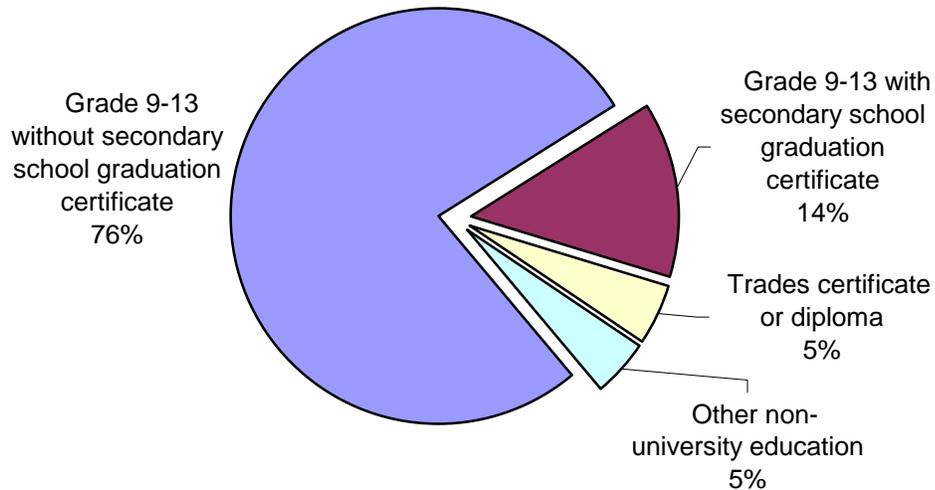
Educational Attainment

In Oakville, a majority of the Black youth aged 15-19 (76%) had not yet completed their secondary school education. Of those aged 20-24, all of them had completed at least their secondary school education, with 45% having completed at least some university and another 39% with some level of non-university education.

Highest Level of Schooling of Oakville Black Youth Aged 15-19

1996

n=220

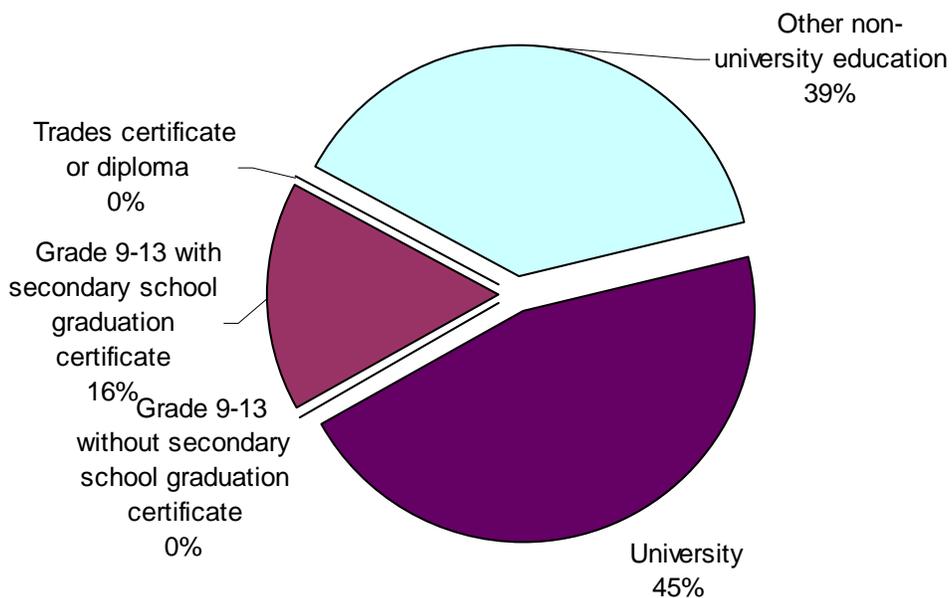


Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census Custom Tabulation.

Highest Level of Schooling of Oakville Black Youth Aged 20-24

1996

n=160

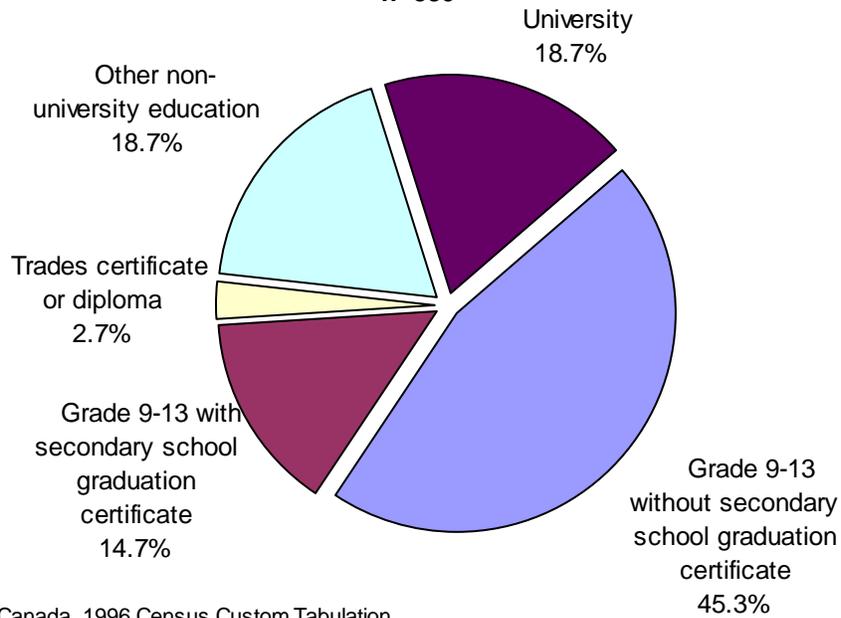


Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census Custom Tabulation.

Highest Level of Schooling of Oakville Black Youth Aged 15-24

1996

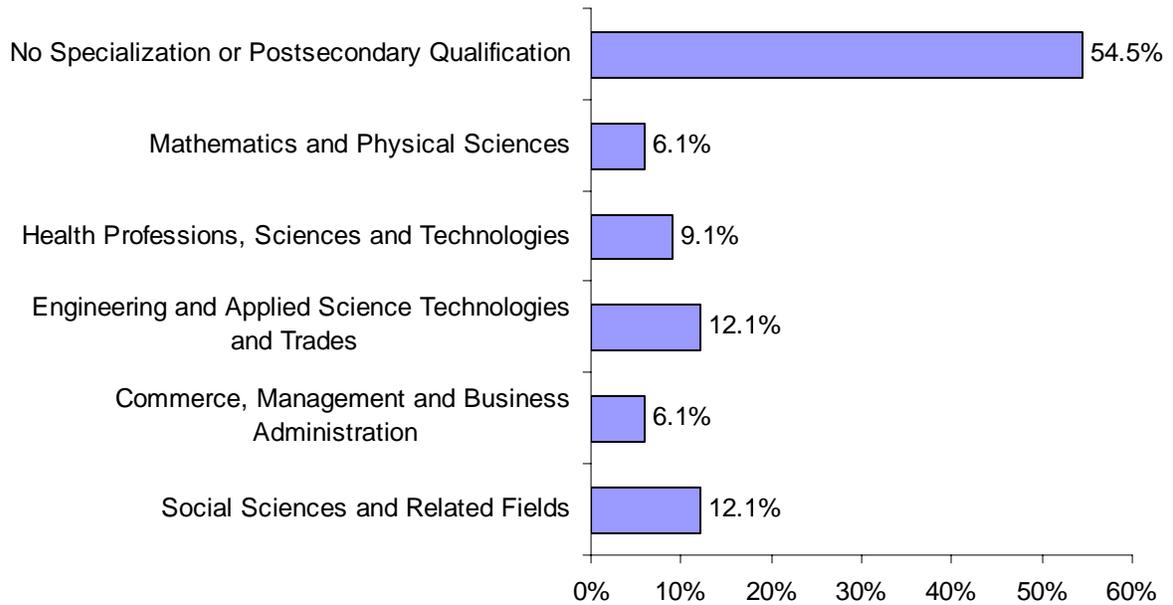
n=380



Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census Custom Tabulation.

Major Field of Study for Oakville Black Youth Aged 20-24, 1996

n=165



Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census Custom Tabulation.

For those black youth aged 20-24 who indicated a field of study, 12% were in Engineering and Applied Science Technologies and Trades and another 12% in Social Sciences and related fields. Nine percent indicated Health Professions as the major field of study, while 6% indicated Mathematics and Physical Sciences and another 6% indicated Commerce, Management and Business Administration.

Black Youth Income

The average 1995 income of Oakville black youth aged 15-19 was \$3,645. This is only slightly lower than the average 1995 income of \$3,934 for all 15-19 youth in Oakville.

For Oakville black youth aged 20-24, the average 1995 income was \$11,121, as compared to \$10,858 for all youth aged 20-24 in Oakville.

While average incomes for black youth are comparable to the average incomes for all youth in Oakville, there is a disparity when looking at the total Black population. The average 1995 income for blacks 15 years of age and over was \$30,636, while it was \$40,070 for all persons 15 years of age and over in Oakville.

Labor

When looking at the labor force participation rate and unemployment rate for black youth in Oakville, we find that the rates are similar to that experience by all youth in Oakville. For black youth aged 15-19, the unemployment rate is 14%, compared to 13% for all 15-19 year olds. For those black youth aged 20-24, the unemployment rate is 12%, compared to 14% for all youth aged 20-24.

Who Am I And Where Do I Fit In?

What we see in the preceding two chapters is a community of blacks in Oakville that forms an integral part of the Town's social and economic fabric. But do they share this view of themselves and their place in the Town?

Social scientists have put forward many theories about the factors that affect identity formation among youth. Self-esteem, a sense of belonging, an assurance that they count, a feeling that they are an important part of the social fabric of their community all affect self-definition. Self-definition in turn acts as a filter through which youth receive incoming messages about their world and their place in it. Ultimately, civic participation, an indispensable element of a community's social capital, rests on youth's response to the age-old question: 'Who am I and where do I fit in?' *Growing Up Black in Oakville* explores how living in Oakville is combining with two elements that shape identity – race and culture – to create a unique sense of identity among black youth. It shows also how the way youth see

themselves relative to their community is influencing their sense of inclusion, ownership and desire for meaningful civic participation.

The study is arranged around ten themes that came out of focus groups with about 55 black youth and 20 parents. The themes capture the essence of the youth's search for answers to the question of 'Who am I and where do I fit into Oakville?' They shed light on the youth's struggle to define who they are as young people and as young *black* people living in Oakville. They reflect the youth's struggle with who others *think* they are and with the decision they must make as to whether to claim their place in Oakville.

A literature review provides backdrop to the focus groups, adding perspective gleaned through the work of writers and social scientists that study youth identity formation. This backdrop is important. Without it the thoughts, experiences and actions of black youth will be interpreted in a vacuum, leading to erroneous conclusions about the extent to which they are similar to or different from other youth. Interpreting black youth behavior as 'different', 'unique', 'exotic' and 'outside the norm' – when it is not – can lead to the belief that black youth are synonymous with 'trouble', 'special needs', 'accommodation' and 'extraordinary measures'.

At the same time, it is possible to underestimate the impact on a young person of wanting, like every other youth, to be accepted, appreciated and even disciplined, without race being a consideration – or a stigma. Living in a community where youth are provided for, even indulged, intensifies this longing. It is a longing that youth express most often through fiercely determined hopes, dreams and passion to succeed, or through the nagging question of whether 'the system' will allow them to realize those dreams. Moving to a beautiful community with the best of amenities – for the most part the dream of their parents – seems to do little to quell the sense of unease among black youth. They still question whether they are truly being viewed as 'just youth', or whether the same fate awaits them as does their black brothers and sisters in the big city.

SECTION 2

As Others See Us: As We See Ourselves

- **The Interviews**

To preserve anonymity the names of interviewees have been changed.

Chapter 3 - "Why do I Have to be Perfect when No-one Else Is?"

One of the premier social scientists to study youth identity formation was G.H. Erikson. Erikson defined adolescence as "a period characterized by selective permissiveness on the part of society and of provocative playfulness on the part of youth." Erikson found that this period in the young person's life is often marked by " deep, if often transitory commitment..." , which society rewards with a " more or less ceremonial confirmation".³ Tamar Rapoport builds on Erikson's theory, showing five specific allowances that society generally grants to youth during this period of their lives.

- i) Lenient control, "when errors are not immediately accompanied by the threat of direct, severe reprisals", thus reducing fear and anxiety over "improper actions".
- ii) Free experimentation, when youth are allowed the privilege of trial and error as they seek out new alternatives, behaviors and rules.
- iii) Extended rights, where youth enjoy privileges without being expected to, as it were, to pay for them at once, (thus) allowing opportunity to acquire extra 'resources' that can later be invested in adulthood.
- iv) Quasi-responsibility, defined as "the right to alternate freely among responsible, non-responsible and irresponsible behavior" as individuals and as a group
- v) Suspended obligations, where "obligations are delayed, but not abolished, allowing youth to "alter their choices on the basis of feedback."⁴

Rapoport and Erikson are not advocating free rein for youth to run amok in society. What they do seem to say is that generally speaking, society is far more understanding of 'youthful indiscretions', for example, than of similar behaviors among adults. Adolescence is a critical phase in the life of the young person and his community. According to Erikson, it involves experimentation with identity, which results in "*a play with fire, the inner fire of emotions and drives and the outer danger of ending up in a social pocket from which there is no return*". Society should not be too quick to stamp out these fires, Erikson says, because if the youth is "too early defined", he commits himself prematurely to the definition that society bestows on him.⁵

³ G.H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis*, Norton, New York, 1968

⁴ Tamar Rapoport, "Socialization Patterns in the Family, the School and the Youth Movement", *Youth and Society*, Vol. 20, #2, Dec. 1988, p.160

⁵ G.H. Erikson, "Ego, Identity and the Psychosocial Moratorium" in *New Perspectives for Research in Juvenile Delinquency*, U.S. Dep't of Health and Welfare, 1955. Quoted by Tamar Rapoport in *Ibid*, Socialization Patterns... 1988

This analysis of how society deals with youth is crucial to understanding the belief by many black families that their children are not allowed to make the same mistakes that others are. The feeling is that if and when they make mistakes, they are likely to end up in the 'pocket' of negative stereotypes and low expectations. As 16-year-old Bob points out: "Like everyone we all do our stupid things. I'm not saying I'm an angel 'cause I'm definitely not."

To keep their children out of the social pocket of negative expectations, black parents often urge their children to be 'twice as good in order to reach half as far' in school or in society. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with urging children to excel. If, however, according to Erikson and Rapoport, youth is a time when society generally expects everything from late blooming to outright anti-social behavior – almost as rites of passage – what happens when a black adolescent feels that in order to avoid landing in the social pocket of negative stereotypes associated with her race, she has to be almost perfect? Will these self or society-imposed expectations distort what for others is a natural progression from youth to adulthood? How will this affect the young person later on?

Elaborating on Erikson's theory J.E. Marcia suggests that youth identity is formed as a result of four basic reactions to the social and cultural context within which they live. Marcia, however, does not agree that youth identity follows a continuum from 'identity confusion' (when a firm understanding of their place in the world is missing) to 'identity achievement' when they resolve these mixed feelings about themselves. Instead, he proposes that all youth go through a period of questioning and exploration. It's what happens after this period that makes the difference.

According to Marcia, *moratorium adolescents*, make very weak social commitments as a result of their quest for identity. This does not mean they are anti-social. It just means that there is not much in what they see that inspires them to don cheerleading costumes. In the focus groups we asked the youth how much they participate in the local in the local life of the Town. Few did. Most – though not all – go outside of Oakville for shopping, movie theatres, "clubbing" and socializing. Few did community service outside of mandatory high school requirements. For a half of them, Oakville, to use the words of one Sociology major, is "not in the picture" of their future plans.

It is possible that young people generally yearn for the bright lights of the city or for independence from parental control after graduation. What is striking about the black youth, however, is the primary reason they want to leave: they don't 'fit in', they are tired of having to defend who they are within a narrow social context, they are tired of not seeing themselves reflected in the landscape of their small-town environment. They are tired of having to be perfect, of having to be what one father referred to as "ambassadors" of blackness, of having to "prove" themselves to friends' parents that they "have manners", or, in the words of Yale law professor, Dr. Stephen Carter, they are "the best black".⁶ Among the youth that say they

⁶ Stephen L. Carter, *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*, Basic Books, New York, 1991, page 48

would stay, many choose that option not because their anticipation differs from the experience of those who leave, but because they do want to prove the stereotypes wrong or because they want to impact social values with their presence.

Identity-achieved youth form commitments to their societal obligations after their period of exploration and academic achievement, high self-esteem, high cognitive performance, self-control and moral reasoning-- one might also add, level of comfort in their surroundings-- often reflect the result. We saw different types of identity achievement among the youth we interviewed. Some had high academic achievement with accompanying career aspirations, but struggled with self-esteem as they saw themselves defined in the eyes of society. Others were witty, thoughtful, perceptive and comfortable in their own skins – even though they felt that black peers saw them – and they saw themselves – as “whitewashed”, or *washed* for short.

Take Geevs for example. Geevs came to Oakville from Jamaica when he was six. “You don’t want to talk with me”, he announced when I phoned to invite him to participate in the focus group. “I’m washed.” My persistence paid off and he joined the group. Geevs’ is studying aviation with a goal to becoming an airline pilot, a goal he says only “death” can kill. He lists mountain biking as his hobby. Smart, sassy, with a sharp sense of humor, Geevs struck the first note in what turned out to be an intriguing discussion with the all-male focus group. As the interviewer I found it particularly intriguing because – well, it wasn’t what I was expecting. After all the hype about black males, I was almost conditioned to expect the anger, the *reaction*. As I learned by the end, however, the reaction is there, but it has, for this group at least, become channeled into a kind of reality-tinged determination to live life on their terms. They feel no urge to abandon Oakville, despite the fact that for Geevs the disadvantage of living here is that he is “black and poor”.

Asked what qualities best define him as a person, he replies:

“It’s about where you live. I go to Toronto and I go to a bank and I go ‘I’d like to deposit this cheque’. The guy goes, ‘Where do you live’ and I go ‘Oakville’. ‘Alright.’ It’s how I dress. I’m not going to dress in baggy pants because I don’t want [to]...It’s about where you live. You can’t be running around Oakville dressed in baggy pants, hoods, do-rags, acting like nobody cares. That won’t fit well in Oakville. It’s a rich retirement place. Gang bangers in Oakville are the biggest dumb-asses I’ve ever seen. Dumb-asses.”

Geevs is also one of the few youth that put interaction with the police in the context of the police doing their jobs, although in his questionnaire he lists “cops” as one of the disadvantages to living in Oakville. He relates instances when he was stopped and questioned in an unnecessarily rude manner. The two white females he was traveling with were never questioned, he says, but he was grilled and asked to present his drivers’ license although he was not the driver. The police officer, he says, threatened to “beat him up”.

“Don’t even bother to complain. [All the police will say is] ‘Nothing like that happened. We picked him up because a lady’s purse was stolen’. Why do you need four cop cars if a lady’s purse is stolen? Who is going to have a purse 3 o’clock in the morning? Didn’t make sense to us.”

The Man in the Mirror

Despite this and other run-ins, however, Geevs retorts: *“I don’t care about that. I treat cops the same way I treat anybody. I’m wary of cops for one reason: I do 140K on the 401 (on the way to school).”* It would appear, in Marcia’s terms, that Geevs has reached a state of identity-achievement where he looks past the immediate issues of race and identifies with the community as a person. But then, Geevs’ identity-achievement is tinged with awareness that as a black youth, he and his friends may well be treated differently than their white female friends.

Mr. D also seems to have also achieved a comfort level with himself that allows him to place his life in a realistic perspective. He describes an instance when he was walking home with his friend from his job at a fast food restaurant late one night, when police cars swarmed and interrogated them, saying that they fit the description of two black youth who had robbed a convenience store. He asked them, “Why are we in the [fast food] uniform and why would I be walking towards the scene of the crime if I had robbed the store?” The officer, he says, responded, “That’s a really good question”, before letting them go.

Before Mr. D got home he was stopped again for the same reason. When the robbers were subsequently caught, they looked nothing like Mr. D.

“The thing I think about cops is that cops are people, just like us. If I saw them out of uniform I wouldn’t even know they are cops unless they told me. They are just like anybody else: they cuss, they smoke, whatever. The thing is, some of them think, some of them don’t think. They just do their job and they don’t question anything. Some of them have the capacity to question things: those are the ones I like.”

Mr. D has no patience for black youth who get caught doing wrong things then complain that they are being harassed.

“Don’t get caught doing wrong stuff in the first place. Like, I get pulled over quite a bit because I speed... I don’t look at the fact that I’m black and the cops don’t look at the fact I’m black. Some of them do. Some of them don’t... You know the difference by their attitude when you talk to them.”

Asked his feelings about these experiences with the police, Mr. D replies that it “shows me the way the world still is”. Racism and profiling are very much alive, he stresses.

“ I fight it. But I fight it in a way that doesn’t put fire to fire. There’s no point in me trying to rationalize or argue with a cop. If I know he is [racist] what’s the point of acting the same way towards him? It throws him off. I’m like ‘yes sir, no sir. Let me take what I have to and go my way. If you know he’s looking for you to fight with him, don’t fight with him. (Mind you) I’m not going to get down and kiss his ass, know what I mean? I’m still a man. I’m still going to act the way I am. But if I know what he’s doing is wrong, I say let me go deal with this in the courts another way. The system is there, know what I mean? Why don’t you make it work for yourself? That’s the problem, the way people – black or white – deal with situations, could easily be dealt with if they had a different attitude toward the problem. I’m not really a passive guy. I’m a hothead, but I’ve learned by my mistakes the hard way. It’s also about maturity...I mean guys 20, 25 acting the fool, acting pro-black whatever you call it then try to rationalize about being stopped by the cops... I’m like, you know, it’s their attitude towards it.”

Mr. D lists personal characteristics, religion and personal style as the elements that influence the way he defines himself. Asked the meaning of the black *do-rag* (a nylon stocking cap with ends hanging down, originally associated with ‘gangsta wear’) he was wearing, Mr. D responded, “It means I like to take care of my hair... I wear what I feel comfortable wearing.” Mr. D’s parents are professionals and he is a first-year university student with aspirations of becoming a veterinarian. He has traveled extensively and has lived in Toronto, Mississauga and Oakville. He has attended both private and public schools, usually as the only black child in his class.

“I’m me and wherever I [go] I’m me, whether it got me in trouble or not. I’m the kind of person, I don’t deal in shades, so you are not going to find any degrees in me. What you see of me here is the same I’m going to be there. I won’t pretend to fit into such and such a group just to fit in. I find that other black kids or white kids depending on where they ‘re from maybe they use that stuff – race – as a defense mechanism.”

Does this mean he does not see a ‘black’ man first when he looks in the mirror?

“No, I’m really high on myself. I have a really high self-esteem as a black man and as a man in general, because there’s a lot riding on a man and on a black man, period. To me it’s not about where you’re from. In certain situations the odds are against me: I can’t be ignorant to these facts. But there’s no point in me asking why any more. I just deal with the fact that that’s just the way it is.”

What’s interesting about the *identity-achieved* black youth is that he seems to forge his identity as a member of the community with the full knowledge that from the perspective of the community he is not an equal participant. We see this in the rationale Mr. D, as did Geevs, used. Mr. D attributes stereotyping, racism and discrimination to “ignorance” of narrow-thinking people.

“Oakville is ignorant in a lot of ways, even about the homeless situation. There are a lot of people that are under the poverty level but they ignore that kind of fact because they have to [portray] a certain image...I’ve a perfect life, my kids go to a perfect school. I’m just happy that I had parents that allowed me to go out and see that this is not what the world is all about. That’s why when I come back here I don’t indulge in that sort of thing. I’m just being me.”

This cleared-eyed practicality means that one minute the youth can excoriate other blacks for getting caught with white friends doing drugs and the next moment acknowledge that the black youth may well become the “fall guy” in a drug bust even though he is the lowest on the totem pole. Mr. D’s reasoning, however, is that the fall guy is caught because he ‘sticks out’ (the same way a white person would stick out among a group of blacks) rather than because of negative intent on the part of the police. In the same conversation where Mr. D describes being questioned about robbing the store while he was walking *towards* it, he essentially justifies targeting. *“Let’s say that a gang of black kids shot up a store in Oakville, every black kid in Oakville is going to be watched. And rightly so.”* He likens this to Muslims being searched more closely at the border after September 11, even though they are seniors or parents with little children.

Youth like Geevs and Mr. D (decidedly in the minority) have the same attitude towards being watched more closely than other youth when they enter stores. Security, they say, is just doing its job in watching for potential thieves. Does this mean they justify being targeted? No, it means they don’t care, because they know they are not planning to steal anyway. They actually find such scrutiny amusing – in a cat and mouse sort of way. On one occasion Mr. D’s Dad had to ask a corner store owner to leave him alone because he’s really a good kid. But Mr. D has a different take on the situation. “You never know”, he says. “That lady may have had experiences in the past that caused her to be like that.” The “problem” for him begins only when the storekeeper asks him to buy and leave while others are still browsing.

For 16-year-old Will the problem could also be that they are youth, rather than because they are black. He says a many of his white friends complain of being watched when they go into stores. “Kids today are not the best, I guess”, he says. Geevs adds that sometimes merchants remember youth from the last time they came in and someone stole. Interestingly, Nikita gave a similar experience of having her knapsack snatched by a school cafeteria attendant who claimed that she came in before with a particular group of youth who stole items from the cafeteria. She says she never did.

The Strong Arm of Discipline

Identity-foreclosed youth also make commitments to social obligations, but they base their commitment on passive acceptance of standards set by significant people in their lives--such as parents – rather than on their own personal exploration of options. Throughout the interviews we see varying levels of this phenomenon. The most powerful expression of identity-

foreclosure was probably demonstrated when the youth described the strong belief in corporal punishment in black families.

First the youth describe the phenomenon of being “cuffed”, “beat”, “made to lie across the bed and take licks”. To a person they attribute remaining on the straight and narrow to this firm disciplinary hand. Then, they voice amazement at their white friends who can’t believe the ‘cruelty’ of black parents. The black youth find it hilarious that friends offer to give them the Kids HelpLine or the number for Children’s Aid when they tell them about being ‘beaten’ the previous night. They think that their friends have images in their heads of the youth being kicked and stomped into unconsciousness – which they aren’t. One teacher even overheard one girl talking and reported to the principal, who proceeded to quiz the youth about how things are at home or whether she is being abused. The girl says she was mystified and amused that the principal would make the connection between her “getting licks” with being abused.

The focus group with the African students was particularly enlightening on this subject, as the youth described– sometimes in hilarious detail – corporal punishment by parents. They think that the absence of corporal punishment is the cause of some of the poor behavior among western youth. For Elijah corporal punishment keeps him in check. He is amazed at friends from the Caribbean who seem to have similar types of parents, yet defy them in the way that white youth defy their parents. “My friend has no sense”, Elijah says, tapping his head with his forefinger. The study draws no conclusions as to whether the youth truly share these parental values or whether they are simply accepting them.

Finally, *identity-diffused* youth are those that are not committed to social expectations and have no interest in forming socially acceptable identities.⁷ These are often the youth that engage in anti-social behavior. None of the black youth interviewed admitted to engaging in anti-social behavior as an outcome of their search for identity.

⁷ J.E. Marcia et al., 1966, “Development and Validation of Ego Identity Status”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 3, 1966, pp. 51-68

Chapter 4 – “A Situation Not of [Our] Own Making”

Like Erikson, Danielsen et. al. believe that identity-formation is a “socially embedded process”, rather than a process that takes place strictly within the individual, independent of influence from their social setting. McCarthy shares this view and cautions against making assumptions about people without consideration of the social milieu in which they are operating.⁸ This social setting, on the other hand is itself influenced by many factors, one of the most significant of which is its historical context. According to Kroeger⁹, historical context provides the roles and models “through which the adolescent can meaningfully implement his or her own needs, talents and interests”, the value of which is determined by the youth but also by cultural demands.

But what if the youth lives within an environment that has communicated to him that what he has to offer or wants to pursue is of little value? There are reasons this sometimes happens. According to Erikson, “*a living culture has its own balances which make it durable and bearable to the majority of its members. But changing history endangers the balance...*”¹⁰ When a group’s socioeconomic status is in danger, he says, “*the implicit moral code becomes more restricted...more exclusive, more intolerant, as though the outer danger had to be treated as an inner one*”.¹¹

In other words, if a community perceives that its status is at risk, its natural reaction tends to be that of pulling away from change, rather than embracing it. The result, however, is that the source of this perceived threat – in this case youth – lose their connection and continuity with the community. Barber reinforces this need for youth to feel connected to their community, not only in the sense that they are participating or have participated in its history, but also at the level of their everyday lives. According to Barber, for healthy development into adulthood a young person needs to experience connectedness with “significant others”; the consistent, positive emotions that come from a sense of relatedness with significant others and a sense that the world is safe.¹²

⁸ Cited by Nadine Dolby, Oct. 2000, “*Changing Selves: Multicultural Education and the Challenge of New Identities*”, Teachers College Record, vol. 102, Issue 5

⁹ Jane Kroeger, June '93, “The Role of Historical Context in the Identity Formation Process of Late Adolescence”, *Youth and Society*, vol. 24, Issue 9

¹⁰ Erikson, E. H. (1963), *Childhood and Society*, p. 293, New York: Norton

¹¹ E.H. Erikson, op.cit. 1968, p.55

¹² Jefferson A. Singer, *Journal of Social Issues*, Fall 2002, vol. 58, Issue 3, p. 535

As members of society, black youth are on the same journey of exploration, self-definition and self-realization as other youth are. The impact of community, however, is often different on them than it is on other youth. First, although like their white counterparts, black youth have different aspects to who they are, race is a primary defining feature in our society for both blacks and whites. According to Jackson and Hardiman:

- i) “ To varying degrees, an individual’s social group membership influences the way one views oneself, others and the immediate or expanded environment.
- ii) “In a race-centered society, the process of grappling with one’s identity is an integral part of an individual’s total social identity development process.
- iii) “Not only is... society race-centered, but it operates on judgments about the superiority/inferiority of racial groups.”

If race-based judgments are a natural phenomenon then, communities such as Oakville that are in racial transition face the challenge of deciding not whether race plays a role in how we interact with each other, but on what role race will play in these interactions.¹³ History does not provide a continuous link to black youth’s past in the Oakville community. Although blacks have lived here since the 1850s and are among some of our most respected citizens, the number of blacks in Oakville has only become significant over the past 30 years or so.

There was never an interview with black parents, including those whose children and even grand children are growing up in Oakville, where race did not figure into the equation of their children’s experiences in one way or other. There were and have always been incidents. In one mother’s words:

“...It was made very clear to [my kids] that they were different. It was not a situation that we created. It was created for them and they responded...”

One professional and her husband moved to Oakville about 10 years ago when their children were 10 and 6. She “did not even give a thought” to the implications of moving into a predominantly white community, where they had found the housing that they liked. But after race-based incidents ranging from a teacher accusing her son of stealing because that’s what “you people” do (the teacher was reprimanded by school authorities), to her son’s current “negative attitude towards police” because of being stopped “on a regular basis”, she and her husband wonder aloud sometimes whether they should have left their children in their homeland.

Looking at the big picture its not that Oakville was or is a hotbed of racial intolerance. Rather:

“We stand out, because we are black. Society does not let them forget that”, the woman explains. *“When the cops see them with white girls that becomes a problem. When there are certain [white boys] the girl was going out with before, that becomes a problem. Then the*

¹³ Bailey W. Jackson and Rita Hardiman, “Racial Identity Development: Implications for Managing the Multiracial Work Force”, *The NTL Managers’ Handbook*, NTL Institute, 1983

parents see them with their daughter and that's a problem. These are problems that these people have created...and they [my sons] really don't want that. And they are not hiding it...It's not like we are someplace where people don't tell you their opinion...."

Normal Daily Living

But like all the parents interviewed, this couple choose to remain, even though, in the words of the husband, "I'm not grounded and will never be". A highly accomplished professional, he chooses to "play a role...for economic reasons". Other parents feel "torn". Then there is the single mother who says simply: *"I live here and nobody is going to chase me out of Oakville."* When the father who says he is not grounded hears this statement he expands on his original thought: *"I control my being...It's my decision and I feel fulfilled. I do not feel intimidated by [Oakville]. I am ready to cope with whatever it may bring."*

Some parents – and youth – however, deliberately wanted to live in a community that was not "Scarlem" (contraction for Scarborough and Harlem) and so moved to Oakville. The consensus among the all-male youth focus group too was that racially, they don't want Oakville to become "Little Mississauga". Its not that they don't want more blacks, they say. What they want are 'quality' people. "If a lot of the white people who are here were rednecks shooting up the place, I wouldn't want to be here either." says one youth, adding that "sometimes the white man may be your best friend. He may keep you out of trouble."

Other parents moved to Oakville for "selfish" reasons – lower priced housing, the trees, the lifestyle – but out of a subconscious desire to "experience something new", to "take a chance". They usually have not taken race as a factor in their move, until after their children have had race-based problems at school, or in the case of one family, they began dating inter-racially or driving their own cars. Some see their children's travails as par for the course, as in this excerpt from a father, whose children are now adults:

"Are we at any particular advantage or disadvantage living in Oakville, is it an individual thing, I came to Oakville because I stumbled into a job in Oakville, the rest came along, I met my wife here. From time to time, we found ourselves to be to the first of many things. ...How do we fit in? All [the] problems that we have expressed here tonight [at the focus group] seem to me to be the normal daily living for any minority. You are the person, you could stiffen your back and say, I'm going to stand up for my rights, however you want to approach a problem. Sometimes we do well. I encourage friends to come here. There are jobs out here, but they say that it's too far out. Sometimes it's ourselves that make or break the things, the way that we perceive us."

The youth too seem to have mixed feelings about 'ownership' of Oakville. Roughly estimated, half of those interviewed say they plan to leave. Others like Bob want to remain. Bob believes that black youth should remain in Oakville because if they keep yearning for

other communities such as Mississauga or Toronto, Oakville will remain unchanged. 'Bob' wants to host monthly black-themed parties that are open to all youth.

Geevs agrees. *"I was born in Jamaica and I do go back. But you know what, I wouldn't fit in there for more than a couple weeks.."* Mr. D also plans to stay in Oakville. Youth who want to move, he says, are "looking for excitement". He has lived in Toronto, whereas, he says, some youth have never even been to Toronto.

"I talk to friends and they're like, 'Oh I don't stay in Oakville. I chill in Mississauga or Toronto usually'. Well that's great. I chill in Oakville. Who cares? Oakville is a comfortable place for me. It's relatively hassle-free. That's the reason why most families move here to begin with...If I had kids this would be a prime place for me to move."

In Geevs view, some parents might even think it's a good thing that the police bother their children, especially if they are out instead of being home at certain times of night. Most of the youth and parents interviewed would disagree vigorously with Geevs sentiment. What is clear, however, is that appreciation for their lifestyle in the Town of Oakville jostles with the desire to leave. For those who want to leave, reasons in many instances are probably not unlike those of white peers. The Town of Oakville they say is "boring", "has nothing to do", "expensive" and "sheltered". Appreciation for the Town on the other hand is expressed in terms such as "opportunities for success", "classy", "clean/spacious/crime-free/no guns" and "good schools". Then there are the unique, race-related reasons for wanting to go: "lack of culture", "racial profiling", "cops", "stereotyping", "racism", "discrimination", "segregated", "lack of black beauty shops".

Chapter 5 – “What’s Race Got to Do with It?”

The black child growing up in Oakville is navigating a situation that is not of his own making. He negotiates his relationship with the community at three levels: as a youth, as a black person and, in cases of new arrivals, as an outsider. The community by the same token has to negotiate its expectations of the black youth amidst its own historical experience that for the most part does not include him as a distinct entity. One of the biggest challenges in this negotiation is that of determining what is the ‘black’ experience and how it differs from the experience of others? What are ‘black’ youth priorities? Are they different in any way from ‘white’ youth priorities?

‘S’ provides insight into this question;

“Black is just one aspect of your identity. It [is] a bigger deal for others than for us. People don’t look at black as [part of your identity] they look at it as who you are. White people have more options and the space to be diverse”. They can be rich or poor, into hip-hop or classical, live in a trailer park or monster home.”

In his controversial book, *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*,¹⁴ Stephen L. Carter writes:

“...[T]he proposition that people who are black can be neatly stuffed into boxes, with experiences and views that are predictably different from the views of people who are white, has practically become an article of faith among advocates of diversity.”

As it prepares for the demographic changes that are underway in its municipalities, the Region of Halton is re-visiting the assumptions on which it has built everything from service delivery to definition of civic participation. The first step in doing this is to look at itself through the eyes of its people from distinct perspectives, such as age, disabilities, ethnocultural/racial minorities, sexual orientation, etc. The plan is to develop a strategy that positions or repositions regional and municipal services to ensure that all citizens have equal access to service, given their own unique needs.

Same as White Youth?

At a recent 4-day youth conference attended by about 100 youth and adults, there were roughly five or six visible minorities, of whom two were black. The event was held as an ‘open space forum’, which meant that participants could post issues of concern to youth in Halton on a bulletin board as an invitation for discussion with others who are interested in these topics. The conference was meant to address homelessness and youth at risk. The workshops that followed reflected youth concerns, ranging from homelessness,

¹⁴ Stephen L. Carter, *Ibid*, p. 35

accommodation and policing to discrimination against drug users, relationships with parents, access for youth with disabilities and sexual health. No youth posted the topic of diversity or race relations. When Halton Multicultural Council posted it four adults and one (white) youth attended. The young woman left part way through the discussion.

The conference brought several questions to mind. Why were there not more visible minority and specifically black youth? More critically, even if black youth were there in greater numbers, what would be expected of them? Would they be expected to raise issues that face them uniquely? Or, would they be expected to bring a new perspective to the concerns of all youth? Would they be seen simply as youth participating in Halton's agenda setting? Or would everything they said be filtered through the fact that they are black? Would they be expected to 'represent' the viewpoints of 'black youth'? Did the absence of black youth mean that 20 out of the 21 topics of discussion (except for diversity) reflected the realities of 'white' youth only?

Dr. Stephen L. Carter¹⁵ challenges the notion of what he calls "representative of the people":

*"the idea that black people who gain positions of authority or influence are vested with a special responsibility to articulate the presumed views of other people who are black – in effect to think and act and speak in a particular way, the **black way** – and that there is something peculiar about black people who insist on doing anything else."*

We posed this question to the black youth in the second half of the focus groups following the conference. We got some interesting answers.

- It is wrong to think that black youth don't have unique experience, they said. Doing so *"undermines the black struggle. We might all experience discrimination as youth like ageism, but it's on another level because we are black and because we are poor. We have another set of values on top of the fact that we are youth..."*
- An Oakville youth centre (one of the recommendations at the conference) would have to have a range of activities. *"It should be diverse. Who plays foosball? White folks love that stuff"*.
- Drug abuse, especially hard drugs, "doesn't generally apply to us"
- *"I wanted to attend Truth About Youth but the principal only send those kind of notices as far as Student Council."*
- *"How can you not be informed about alcohol? You hear about it in gym class, you hear about it on television and radio...Everyone knows what alcohol does to you. It's your choice to drink...In my school it's the white people who tend to go out every single weekend...They drink before school and come to school high...disturbing my education and frankly, I don't like it."*

¹⁵ op. Cit. Page 31

In one focus group, however, the youth agree that they do share many of the same concerns with white youth – just from a different perspective.

More than a Color

So what does race have to do with it? What *are* the critical elements that shape the way black youth define themselves relative to the Oakville community? We asked the youth to choose from ten factors, common in social studies on identity: religion, family income, gender, family, school, extra-curricular activities, community volunteerism, friends, personal characteristics and personal beliefs. The most important factors shaping their identity tended to be religion, personal beliefs and family. To this end they are probably not very different from any other group of youth. The least critical factors tended to be extra-curricular activities, community volunteerism and school. Again, although the study does not compare responses to this question with those from the broader youth population, one wonders if their responses would have been similar.

The majority of youth start off by saying that who they are is not primarily defined by their race.

“I believe in God and I believe that He is my foundation when everything else is down and I have absolutely no one to turn to because He is never going to leave me nor forsake me... It really doesn't affect me being black because I take it as : `if God is on my side who's against me.”(Beats)

“Color is not the issue...our religion is everything. If we have God in life what else can stop us.” (Shakira)

To me personally, God is someone who doesn't look at color. All those who believe in God, who share that kind of relationship...see, we are all as one, we're all as brothers and sisters. So why are we gonna look at one another as different colors, different races....We're all one. We're all one in God.” (Monique)

“My family is most important because everything that makes me is influenced by my family. What my parents do and how they act rubs off on me. It's a loving environment, supporting me in whatever I set out to do, correcting me when I need to be corrected. My personal values are important because I have certain ideals of how I would like my life to go. Through those personal beliefs I'd like to think that I can achieve whatever I want to.” (Mary, 16)

“At school its how you dress, social, personal characteristics.” (Chad, 13)

The young teens cite religion (dictates lifestyle); sports (forces you to take care of yourself); school (gives you the education you need to succeed) and extra-curricular activities that keep them out of trouble.

Inevitably, however, race seeps into the picture, sometimes from outside sources, sometimes from the young person's own decision that this is a governing factor in who they are. Says Money, *"I still think that even though we don't see it (our race) as affecting religion, I think it affects it in a big way, just the way pictures are drawn from the Bible.... Everyone is shown as white. Even the Egyptians are shown as white and Jesus is shown as white. There are no Africans..."*

Another young woman, who is Catholic, laments that in her home country the Catholic Church celebrates the veneration of the Black Madonna and features icons that are at minimum sepia in tone, even if they are not black. This does not happen in her Oakville church. What right does the Church have, she questions, to choose the aspects of its traditions that suits its racial definition of the faith, while leaving others out? Another young woman from the Caribbean who attends an evangelical church sees it differently, however. As a minority in her church she does miss the worship styles of her homeland, but feels she has no right to expect it to continue here. Jamal, whose family is the only black family in church feels self-conscious as he enters his church. He senses an imperceptible flinching especially when he sits beside older members of the congregation.

"Race affects personal beliefs... The way you view the world and perceive what goes on around you is based on the way people treat you. If you feel accepted by society you see society in a totally different way than someone who feels completely ostracized." (Jada)

"We're focusing so much on our race. I'm sure that white people don't spend their whole lives thinking about the fact that they're white. They think about their career...their families... But we tend to think about whether we will be treated fairly at job interview... are people going to give me funny looks... You are automatically living your life in comparison to the lives of the majority." (S')

I Didn't Know I was Black until I Came to Oakville

What we see throughout the interviews is a delicate interweaving of the youth's psyche as *young* people and as *young black* people. It's sometimes difficult to spot where the former ends and the latter begins, as when the youth complain of the absence of the stores they like to shop. But one can imagine hearing a broad cross-section of teens having the same complaint, judging from the armies of them at Square One (Mississauga) or the Eaton Centre. So are black youth unique in any way? Stephen Carter broaches the topic in this way:

"The [North American] culture consists of a broad and interwoven set of subcultures, suggesting that there are reasons to value specially their political and aesthetic visions. The trouble is that race is not the same as culture and there is no way of predicting whether a particular black person ...will adopt any particular cultural stance...[T]o allow, or worse, to

encourage the state to use racial differences as proxies for other differences is potentially quite dangerous to the cause of equality."

In the interviews the youth paint a complex picture of how they are being shaped by the interaction between their race and factors such as economics, class and culture in Oakville. Sometimes it is easy to spot where, in the eyes of the world around them, they are viewed and treated as *young black* people. Take Mary for instance. Growing up in rural Ontario, Mary said she was not aware of being black till Grade 4 when a classmate pointed out to her. After that she said, race affected her personal beliefs, which at the start of the conversation was a major factor in defining who she is. *"It made me realize that because I'm black I probably have to struggle harder to reach the goals that I want to..."* Asked what triggered this realization Mary replied, *"Deep down I knew I had to struggle, but just watching history, especially black history, slavery and the whole civil rights movement. Just learning that you realize that yes I am going to have to struggle harder because of my skin color."*

The theme of 'not realizing we are black until we came to Oakville' surfaces in many conversations. At first I was puzzled. How can a person live with their skin color for six, 10, 12 years and not know what color it is. Then it became clear that the expression did not necessarily refer to peers calling them names, which did sometimes happen. It related more to them feeling forced to choose their peer groups, for example, based on race. If the Italians hang together, the *ginos* (sort of like a John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* type in *youthpeak*) stick together, the Asians seek each other's company, then the choice is to deliberately seek out other blacks—or not.

"If we only hang out with people like ourselves...that's where the prejudice starts. We need to take time to understand others", says Samson one of the African youth interviewed. He adds that the group of black students that stick together at his school are not well liked by the general population. A member of one such group at another school sees the African students like Samson as breaking ranks to gain favor of whites.

Interestingly, some of the black students that do attend his school say that they seek each other out because in their previous school – typically in Toronto or Mississauga – they had multicultural friends, a situation they find difficult to replicate here. For other students, such as one 14-year-old who moved into her neighborhood from out of province, become 'black aware' happened when a neighbor gushed, "gosh, we haven't seen a black girl around here for a long time".

"I don't go a day without hearing that I'm black, [especially in jokes]." (Chad)

"My mom won't let me go out with more than one or two friends at a time especially if they are black... You get the feeling that people are always taking a second look at you." (Betty)

Crystal came to Oakville at 13 from Toronto.

"I didn't know I was black until I came to Oakville...[In Toronto] I lived in 95% Italian neighborhood and went to a multicultural school. Everyone would just have a good time, whatever. We were kids. I don't understand the shift between when you are 12 and 14. All of a sudden color matters. People look at me. They do a double take like 'Is that a black person?'"

People would not talk to her, she said. It seemed to be a potent blend of high school cliquishness, being an 'outsider' and people's perceptions of who she was as a black girl. Generally speaking, most of the youth agreed that it was not their race or even people's reaction to it that mattered, but what in the end it means to them as individuals. For some it means disproving what they think are people's views are of them.

"I say to myself, don't just say you are a black person, show them who you are. Let them know that you are a black person and you are proud of it but that's just one aspect of who you are." (Natasha, 16)

"When I think I don't just limit myself to being black. I can see things from other people's perspective too." (Mista Smith, 16)

"Here race is very important in the way I define myself. Back home race is no big thing because the majority are black. When I was coming here they told me you are going from a black majority to a black minority. I was like, O.K. Race was the last thing on my mind when I was coming, But you sit in a room and you are like 'Hmm, I am the only black person here or Hmm there are only two black people here'. (Shelly later joined a black dance group). "I remember the first show I did I sat and looked around and there were no white people in the room and I was like 'Oh my gosh, I haven't sat in a room of black people in a long time!'" (Shelly, 16)

"Without race as an influence my personal beliefs are most important. I do a lot of evaluating about things like what I believe in, where do I stand in this world? Who am I? How do I act to other people? My philosophy is just to treat people as I want to be treated. Race tends to be an issue with other people." (Natasha, 16)

For others race requires one to consciously ignoring other people's expectations:

"If you focus too much on proving yourself you are not going to accomplish what you want, you're just going to accomplish what you know they don't want....I don't care. If people don't get to know me that's their fault." (Jada)

"If you think about it you'll see it (racism). But I choose not to let it affect me", says Jeffrey, citing community volunteer activities as key defining features because "those are the things you have control over", rather than personal characteristics such as race over which

one has no control. Natasha grew up in a multicultural community near Toronto where she was used to seeing people in terms of “the countries they come from”, rather than by race. She simply saw herself as a member of another culture.

“When I came here there were mostly Portuguese, Filipino, (not many races). I felt smaller and I didn’t know how to fit in. People tend to be like, ‘Oh you know about this, you’re black’ and I’m like ‘No, I basically came from the same [environment] as you’. My parents are divorced just like yours. My family is the same. The only thing different for me is my culture—my music, my food and my skin color. I try not to judge a book by its cover.”

Do They Want Me?

The world around them seems intent on reminding these youth, however, not only of the fact that they are black – they already know that – but what their blackness means. Sometimes this comes in the form of jokes. Black youth struggle with this jokes at their expense, wincing at the extent to which these jokes pick up on negative stereotypes of blacks in popular culture. Some chafe at the underlying assumptions behind a white peer referring to a black youth as “Hey Negro”, refusing to call him by name. Or at the fried chicken and watermelon jokes – actually more relevant to African Americans than to Canadians. Mista Smith, who was born in Oakville of West Indian parents is called ‘Oreo’ (black on the outside white on the inside) because he does not speak with a “black” accent. *“Sometimes I get jealous of people with accents”,* he muses.

Some jokes are particularly crafted to underscore the myth that blacks are as natural to sports as they are accidental to intellectual pursuits. “Wow, a black guy who reads”, a friend once said to Mista Smith when he saw him reading. A Filipino classmate in Tae Kwon Do who assures Mista Smith that he will win a particular competition because he is black. He wins, but he argues, “It was not because I am black!” He feels pressured to do sports when he does not even want to do it. He does sports, however, but only because he feels he is good at it – not because he is black. Even coaches sometimes enter the act.

As part of a community, however, the youth often do not want to be constantly making waves or to appear over-sensitive. *“I laugh about it because I know that they don’t mean...it. They think its funny”,* says Natasha. *“I don’t want to make a big deal about it because will just cause more segregation”,* says Billy, 18. Fed up eighteen-year-old Samantha on the other hand urges the joker: “You are a real funny guy, eh? Why don’t you take your act on the road?”

The least important shapers of the youth’s identity, such as community volunteerism, extra-curricular activities and school tend to be that way because of limited involvement or because the youth see it as a means to an end (such as community service hours), a necessary activity for everyone. In the case of one youth, school is only one source of learning – there is the street, jobs, etc., he says. Asked if his peers feel the same way, he points to youth at school

from Third World countries, who work harder than everyone else and do better. It annoys him sometimes. Interestingly, in the written portion of the focus group the youth indicate involvement in a wide range of extra-curricular activities, from singing, dance and acting, to jazz bands, social justice organizations, yearbook committees, church and martial arts. Few, however, were involved in community-based activities. Given the range, one can only conclude that the youth did not see these activities as important components of how *they* defined themselves.

Almost as a form of rebellion against negative stereotypes, some black youth deliberately refuse to participate in activities – such as sports – commonly associated with their race. One teen on refusing to run track at his new school told his mother that he had no intention of enacting a version of ‘Run, Nigger, Run’ for spectators. Some parents view excelling in sports as a way of distinguishing oneself, possibly as a way of drawing attention to academic prowess. Others are not as sure:

“The saddest thing is if a child is good at (sports) they...[others] do not focus on (academics). (Even you) can’t really appreciate the positive qualities because you think you’re stereotyping your children.” Perception of how society views them can also lead youth to engage in what is commonly known as ‘reverse discrimination’, probably during the rebellion stage described earlier. Says one mother: *“My son he does all the crazy stuff that I don’t like. He says, I’m going to show them what a real black should be like. He tries so hard to portray this African or black image. I say to him, do you know what you are doing? You are portraying a different face of racism yourself!”*

Chapter 6 - "It Looks Different on Me than on Them"

Dolby questions any assumption that people have stable, core identities that they spend their lives trying to fulfil. She cites Scott¹⁶ who suggests that identity categories such as race are merely "an enunciation...that constitutes hierarchies and (relationships) of power". Hall¹⁷ points out that identity exists only in relation to an opposite categorization. So you are black only in relation to white or Asian or Indian and so on. *"(Race) achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself."* The new term for this is *racialization*.

Aside from the levels of melanin in the skin, what then is being 'black'? Looking at the sentiments expressed in the focus groups through Scott's 'eye of the needle' metaphor it's dress, attitude, music and other expressions or products that define those who partake of them as it does those who don't. Living in a community such as Oakville with its unspoken value for "cultural commonalities" and "shared conditions of life" as components of social order could mean for some that blackness cuts across racial lines. In one focus group the youth were particularly irritated by this belief which they say is popular not among blacks but among whites. Particularly galling is the proud assertion on the part of white friends, "I'm blacker than you are", which really means "I sport more of what I think black culture is than you do." It's a statement that elicits derision from young blacks.

"At first it used to bother me. But as I grew older I am like, they'll learn that there is more to being black than trying to do (what we do)", says one teen. Being black for these youth involves more than just knowing the lyrics to a song or dressing in urban wear. The young man continues:

"It's more than what you see on TV. More than having bling bling and fast cars. It's not like we all have money, we all have women. There is a struggle (to being black) but they don't understand that. (It's) the struggle of how our parents weren't always accepted and how we aren't always accepted. It's the characteristics of what people put on you, that they would never be able to grasp."

While peers – derisively referred to as "wiggers" (contraction of white and the N-word) – are able to buy the fashions, the music and the name brands associated with being 'black', however, for the black youth in the focus group, in a small community like Oakville, being associated with these paraphernalia does not buy the admiration of those around them. In the focus group interviews, some black youth sometimes felt that they were being perceived by society as a threat, particularly when they dressed, spoke and acted in a manner that was

¹⁶ Joan Scott, 1995, "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Identity, in J.Rajchman, *The Identity in Question*, Routledge, New York.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, 1991, Globalization and Ethnicity in A. King (ed) *Culture, Globalization and the World System*, Binghamton, New York

different from the society around them. Some schools outlaw bandanas (associated with gangs) and headbands favored by some young women, which though no different than those worn by white students – except they are wider – are seen to carry a threatening significance.

A Point to Prove

Of course the most controversial of all the expressions of blackness is the wearing of urban street wear associated with hip-hop culture – the baggy pants worn at the top of the thighs, the large hooded jackets, gold chains and other paraphernalia. This style is favored by youth across all racial lines. But many of the black youth that wear them are conscious that they generate fear, threat and negative expectations in the eyes of those around them. Billy sees this fear as being so real, some black youth get ‘jumped’ by whites, especially ‘preppy white boys’, before the blacks have a chance to ‘jump’ them. (He stresses that in Oakville “the chance of getting jumped while walking down the street are pretty slim.”) Billy feels that “you get the kind of respect that you demand.” If you are a physical, fight-oriented person, you get respect out of fear. If you are “intellectual and charismatic”, you get positive respect, regardless of what you are wearing.

In her study of Fernwood School in South Africa, Nadine Dolby found that the black girls preferred to wear the more costly European jeans to labels such as Levis favored by white students. The blacks felt that on them, the more commonplace labels would be viewed as ugly or inferior. The whites on the other hand interpreted the black students’ preferences with a mixture of admiration, wonder and belief that they are trying to prove a point. They couldn’t see the value of purchasing such expensive jeans. Both groups achieve their social definition through the eye of the needle that the other represents.

Dolby took her study a step further as she compared the relationships between coloreds with blacks and whites. She found that among older students who had entered the school in the pre-Mandela era, coloreds enjoyed closer relationships with blacks, with whom they banded for protection, given that they were in the minority. They also shared other common features such as class and background, given that they were children of social workers, teachers, nurses, etc. They also shared a common taste in music. A colored person, for example, who listened to rave music, would according to Dolby, “be ostracized by her or his classmates and seen as a threat to ‘colored’ identity”. In the younger grades Dolby found the opposite to be true. The colored students who entered the school in the post-Mandela era when blacks were in the majority tended to form affinity with the whites, sharing in their sense of being in an overwhelmingly black environment. Among this group of children rave music was perfectly acceptable, harking back to Willis’ ‘shared experience’ phenomenon that flows from new social relationships.

Whichever way the shared experience runs, black youth in Oakville have their own take on the meaning of their attire. Geevs views black ‘thug-wannabes’ as “dumbasses”. Samson describes his dress as “urban clothing”. “You can’t dress to intimidate people. I don’t want to

make other people around me uncomfortable”, he says. Elijah on the other hand sports ‘thugwear’ because it is “comfortable”. He thinks that blacks get respect not only for being leaders in urban design – which generates the rip-offs so popular among youth – they are respected for their talent and intelligence.

Chapter 7 – “Are You Crazy? Man Those Guys Break the Law!”

Black youth then have mixed feelings about the notion of ‘shared experience’. Some embrace it, while others seem to live in a kind of dual world where they embrace shared social relationships at superficial levels, but reserve their ‘true’ selves for those people with whom they feel they have shared history, culture and/or world view. More often than not these are other blacks. This is not a new phenomenon, nor does it exist only among blacks.

Among focus group participants things are not so cut and dried, however. Although shared experience as blacks brought groups of teens together, there is very strong evidence of cross-racial friendships as well. Sometimes it is because there isn’t a critical mass of other blacks in Oakville from which to choose friends. Other times it’s because of parental encouragement to ‘spread their wings’. When one youth tried to reconstruct his *posse* like the one he had in Toronto, he had to settle for a mixed group that contained other ‘ethnics’ that shared his values. Maria, who is bi-racial, marvels at how people perceive her racially. “Even going to a friend’s house and the parents look at me like ‘what’s she?’ One friend’s grandmother (who lives in another country and is married to an Asian) gives Maria and her sister “dirty looks” every time they go over to visit. Her friend later apologize and tell her that her grandmother does not like black people.

The youth may have friends from different backgrounds, but subconsciously, race and culture fuse to create distinctions in their expression of those friendships. For example, there is a strong perception that white youth are more likely than the black youth to engage in acts of anti-social behavior, including drug use and bender parties that wreck parents’ homes and expensive belongings. Of course, in a focus group setting one hardly expects that drug users and ‘benders’ will proclaim their involvement in these activities and as such one cannot tell where perception ends and truth begins. What was interesting, however, was (a) how universal the belief was in just about every focus group and (b) the fact that the differences on how to spend the weekend do not seem to prevent the youth from bonding with their white peers. It’s a matter of degree and terms of bonding.

Reverse Stereotyping?

Money sticks more to his black friends for true ‘chillin’ because “white (kids) are the ones getting in trouble”. This statement is greeted with cheers and shouts of agreement from those around the room. (We should point out that this particular group was an ‘affinity’ group in research terms, meaning they have ties beyond the focus group. They all attend the same school and seem to have strong connections as friends). Beats: “*You’ll have a black kid going up to his mother, ‘Shut up, mother. F you mother...No!’*” The room erupts again with laughter and exchange between the participants as they use their hands and bodies to show the heavy discipline that would be meted out in a black home if they were to ever dare speak to their parents in that manner. “*You’d get the belt, the book, the computer come sailing at you!*” Again laughter.

The all-male group also makes the same observations, describing how friends take their parents' cars when they go away – or even on the weekend for that matter. Sometimes they drive without licenses. “They’re driving mini-vans and sports cars. I go, Why? What’s the point?” The youth imitate the lax parental attitudes they perceive among their white friends. “They’re like, ‘Did you drive the Porsche again?’ ‘Sorry, Dad’ ‘Don’t worry’”. The youth don’t really believe that all white youth drive Porsches and do drugs. They say this with a kind of humorless laugh that suggests that the youth who do engage in this kind of behavior are primarily white, not that the majority of white youth engage in this behavior.

The topic of drug use among youth elicits a similar reaction. There seems to be a consensus among the youth that their white friends have the means, the inclination and the license by society to engage in anti-social behaviors without ending up in Eriksson’s *social pocket*. This does not prevent them from being friends, it just means that the friendships often seem to rest on the given that society will make distinctions in how blacks are treated if they get caught.

“The white people say that we smoke so much, that all we do is smoke weed and slack off in school. Who are the ones smoking the weed? They are! It disgusts me so much, I say ‘Oh My god, why do you do that? I know the teachers think we are doing it....But its, Oh my god...(It’s them. They break the law, man, all the time! It doesn’t matter what they drive, they could drive a Pinto, they are breaking the law all the time... They get away with it clean.” Asked if he participates in these activities Beats retorts, *“I want to go to college!”*

Danger continues. *“Imagine having three white guys and a black guy in a car and they get pulled over for driving fast or whatever. The cops find marijuana, the first person he looks at is the black guy, ‘Young man, whatever, whatever...’ You don’t have to say anything. They know (think) its yours. They blame everything on you.”*

This feeling is not confined to an affinity group of friends, however. Will, who attends a high school of over a thousand students, agrees: *“I think it’s basically the white youth that are causing the trouble. I don’t know if it’s because the white youth are the majority or if it’s just coincidence that they get caught. I know a lot of guys...I really can’t think of too many of my black friends that are into drugs. I know a lot of white people that are really into drugs. They’ll sell it and they do it.”*

We saw earlier Mr. D’s and Geesv’s irritation at black youth who get caught doing illegal activities. It’s not just the fact of their involvement, which is foolish enough, he says. It’s their naivete over the reality that they will pay a heavier consequence. *“Why would I hang with drug dealers if I know that if I get caught I’m going to get the worse part of it?”* Mr. D asks. He says that his “dominant” group of friends with whom he shares interests such as music, are black, although he does have friends from different backgrounds. He knows of one black youth actually “took the rap” even though he was only a minor player in the drug scene in which he was involved. Of course, given Mr. D’s practical nature, he adds that on the other

hand, the white youth was not the one who got caught with the drugs. *“ They have this feeling that this guy took the fall. But the fact of the matter is evidence. That’s just the way the law works.”*

Buying Hair

Black youth then seem keenly aware of the elements of their lives that they share with all their white friends and those aspects that they can only share with other blacks without having to explain and defend. Not all youth fall in this category. Jen for instance is a fourth generation Canadian whose ancestors came from the US. *“Canadian culture is the only culture I know”*, she says. On the other hand, being black, she shares elements such as family traditions, cuisine and even body shape with other black women. Then again, she stresses, her difference in body shape is more of a perception in the eyes of people around her since her *“butt is flat”* and she does **not** have a *ghetto booty*.

Young women joke about the relief they feel when they are with other blacks and thus do not have to explain why they have to ‘go buy their hair’ in Mississauga on a Friday night in order to have fabulous braids on Monday. Others express weariness at having to explain – again – how their hair grew so much overnight or defending themselves against charges of ‘fakery’ leveled by white peers who do not understand the significance of braided extensions in black culture.

Studies such as Kandel find that adolescent best friends tend to share similar education goals, performance levels, political and religious beliefs. They even share similar attitudes towards illicit drugs. Stienberg et al. found that high achieving blacks tended to affiliate with high achieving students of other racial and ethnic groups, a phenomenon that leads to accusation of “acting white” as Fordham and Ogbu point out. Such responses by black youth to their environment become intensified when they live in tightly defined communities such as Oakville, where they don’t have the option of living in black neighborhoods and where they may feel pressure to not segregate themselves, especially at school.

The study showed, however, that racial and cultural factors sometimes intervene. Born in an African country, 17-year-old Nikisha came to Canada at six:

“I feel more connected to black people because they can relate more to what I’m saying. They have the same culture as you do. Before when most of my friends were white it was weird because their culture was so much different. Like if they come to my house they say ‘Eww what’s that smell’...Or when we go to a party they’ll be just standing there and I’ll be like ‘Come on guys, let’s dance’.”

Survival

Cross¹⁸ explains the seeming contradictions among black youth regarding their social relationships with white peers. The model is particularly relevant to communities such as Oakville, where 'shared experiences' are a valued part of community norm. Cross sees black youth along a continuum in terms of the way they define blackness. During the *pre-encounter* stage, the young person might have a social group of mainly whites. They may even outright reject relationships with other blacks.

The youth then enters the *encounter* stage, which is often marked by confusion and ambivalence. This is where the 'Who am I' questions are likely to emerge because the youth becomes acutely aware that the social context in which they live is presenting them with two distinct filters through which to view their world. These are: the filter of their predominantly white social group, which defines their everyday lives; and, the filter of black social group expectations, which may or may not be present in their immediate surroundings whether at school or on a community basketball team.

The young person may resolve these feelings of ambivalence by entering an *immersion* stage where he adopts a black social group (locally, or if necessary outside of the community); rejects his white reference group and assumes self-expressions associated with blackness – hairstyle, clothing, slang, interpretation of history, etc. He may also become hyper-sensitive to racial issues. In the *internalization* stage that follows, the youth may then adopt a black reference or social group but without feeling the need to reject white friends. He has achieved an internally defined racial identity, high degrees of flexibility and objectivity regarding racial issues. For Black youth in a defined community such as Oakville, internalization may be the ultimate expression of identity-achievement.

Jackson and Hardiman also present a similar process of identity-awareness among black youth. Their distinctions, however, are bolder and more pointed. Cross' pre-encounter stage becomes for Hardiman and Jackson the *acceptance* stage, when "the black person...attempts to gain resources – e.g. approval, sense of worth, goods, power – by accepting and conforming to White social, cultural and institutional standards. The acceptance of these...standards requires rejection and devaluation of all that is black." This phase of a black person's life, the authors say, is marked by avoidance of activities and tasks that relate to race or racism or making statements like, "people are people, and if blacks work hard they will be judged by their merits" and "if you want to get ahead you have to act as much like Whites as possible".

Could this could be part of the reason for the reluctance among some black youth to participate in activities like Black History Month? Sometimes, one group of teens say, lack of participation reflects cynicism among the youth as to the genuineness of, in this case, the school in hosting Black History Month activities. Other times, however, they feel that youth "back away" because they are aware that their white peers view the celebrations negatively.

¹⁸ Cited by Wade and Okesola, *op.cit.*

At best, they (white peers) see black history as being in the past or that it is not worth their time. At worst, “they feel that the blacks are going to take over, so they get hostile because they think, ‘what’s next?’” The response by some black students? “‘Let’s not make ourselves more glorified or it will only get worse (for us)’”, suggests one teen.

The *resistance* phase that follows *acceptance*, says Jackson and Hardiman, is followed by *redefinition* – a phase almost identical to Cross’s *immersion* phase. In redefining herself, however, the young black risks being seen by her peers as ‘segregationist’, particularly in a community that is striving to achieve a state of cross-racial inclusiveness. During the *redefinition* phase the youth may reject definition of herself through Hall’s ‘eye of the needle’ of whiteness, by consciously choosing black role models, artistic expressions associated with blackness, etc.

As with Cross, Jackson and Hardiman’s *internalization* stage represents a type of resolution when the black youth realizes that he does not have to choose either or, but can remain firmly grounded in his identity as a black person while having shared experiences with others. In Jackson and Hardiman’s words: “As Black people (in this stage) begin to fully adopt the consciousness of the internalization stage, they become more comfortable with their new sense of being black. Even in situations where their Black perspective is not valued, they find that they have the necessary sustenance to prevail.”¹⁹

These reactions to living as a black person in a tightly defined, predominantly white community bear more than a passing resemblance to Erikson and Marcia’s theories of how youth develop their identity, as we saw earlier. Whether the shaping of identity happens along a continuum of self-awareness (Erikson), or as individual reactions to the stage of life they are in (Marcia), living in a community such as Oakville intensifies the choices that black youth have to make about the way they interact with the world around them.

¹⁹ Ibid, Jackson and Hardiman

Civic, political and institutional leaders in Oakville support the notion of shared experiences, community and common values. It's part of building social capital, which in turn contributes to the richness of a community in the same way that economic capital does. Deriving the social capital of black youth, however, requires the community to understand the differences in texture between their adolescent journey and that of their peers.

Chapter 8 – “As a Black Person in Oakville Money Becomes an Issue”

The topic of money was an extremely sensitive one that required careful probing as we tried to answer what, if any, impact socioeconomic status had on the way the youth interpreted their experiences as blacks living in Oakville. In the eyes of one 14-year old, money is not a key factor in defining who she is: *“If you are a good person, whether you are living in a shack or in a mansion, you will accept yourself and accept people.”*

But will people accept you? In some ways Oakville suffers from a double jeopardy of being an above average wealthy community overall, while being very much a town whose members hail from all socioeconomic backgrounds. We had to be careful in our interpretation of the responses to the question of money because we wanted to be sure whether black youth experience was ‘race’-based, ‘income-based’ or a combination of the two. We also tried to steer clear of the assumptions held by many that simply by virtue of living in Oakville, one is automatically defined as a snob who spends Saturday evenings counting their gold.

Of the 17 youth who responded to the question on income, nine reported family incomes of \$100,000 or more and four earned \$50,000-\$69,000. Four families earned below \$50,000 and both were single-parent families. Among the seven parents (not necessarily of the youth interviewed) who responded to the income question, five earned between \$100,000+ in family income; one earned \$70,000-\$99,000 and two earned \$50-69,000. The parents’ occupations also gave clues as to their income levels. Most frequently cited are nurses, transit drivers, physicians, project managers, skilled tradespeople, Ford employees, self-employed business people and educators.

The parents saw themselves as being no different than their neighbors socio-economically. *“What’s wrong with being Caribbean and affluent?” We too came from affluent circumstances. It’s not that we all came from the dregs”,* says one mother in the focus group. She elaborates:

“My husband wants to buy a([luxury car) and I say no... Why? We’re already under the microscope. We both have decent jobs. We work hard and we come by our money 100% honestly. We do our investments just like the next guy...I just don’t necessarily like a lot of attention that way.”

So far no different than any other modest person who shuns the spotlight. Then her husband drops the other shoe. *“Race is an issue”,* he says. *“We stand out a lot more visibly so that it’s not difficult to see us.”* Being black means we have to resort to extraordinary means to keep quiet what others do openly—flaunt their wealth. The result, we’ll keep driving our present understated car in the hopes that we won’t attract attention to ourselves.

Money and Popularity

Another single mother tells the group that her next-door neighbor, who had previously questioned how she was able to afford such a large home on their street, stopped talking to her once she bought her new car. It's the kind of intrusion that one would normally expect of a nosy, envious neighbor. In the minds of these families, however, whether because of the tone of questioning, or because of their own race filter, the silent question arises, "Is it because...?" One female high school student recounts a similar experience when she started driving her parents' Infinity SUV to school. People questioned what her parents did for a living and whether she had a job to pay for it. Was this a standard question? No, she says, many other white students drive SUVs, BMWs and other luxury cars to school without comment.

Another woman reports that her neighbor wondered what she did for a living and how could she, a single woman, afford such a large home. The neighbor wondered why she came and went at different times of the day and night, the insinuation being that she was engaged in some kind of illegal activity.

Despite the low profile the adults give to the impact of finances, however, about a third of the youth say that money is the only potential obstacle they had to achieving their career dreams. Interestingly, the two respondents that made the strongest connections between race and socioeconomics in their experiences are those whose family income is below \$50,000. As can be expected, their family income affects their ability to fully participate in activities their peers take for granted: the trips, the expensive clothes, visits to the mall to shop. It is also not surprising that their finances impact on their sense of place in the community.

But does youthful alienation from 'popular groups' or 'cool groups' equate race-based rejection, just because the person is black? Well yes – and no. When you are in an environment in which you are an absolute and very visible minority, it takes an extra effort for the mind to separate the source or motivation behind your circumstances. Your sense of alienation begins when you are unable to participate in common activities of the community because of some intrinsic feature – you lack the finances; your parents are strict or their cultural norms do not allow it; you have to work every week on that day. After being repeatedly told no, however, the group stops asking, then it begins to assume that even if the activity costs little you won't go anyway. It so happens that you are black, or Chinese, or an immigrant. Or you have a disability. The lines become blurred and soon you are not sure anymore why no one asks you to join in the group's activities. Or maybe it doesn't matter, as 'Nikita' points out, because "people just assume you would have no interest in their activities because of who you are" anyway.

Rich Black Girl

Maria's story sheds some light. She attends school in one of Oakville's wealthy enclaves. Her parents are divorced and although it appears that her father is quite wealthy, her mother is

primarily responsible for supporting her and her two siblings. Money is tight and 'paycheck to paycheck' is all too often her reality. This, Maria says, impacts her personal values and beliefs. "My beliefs come from everything that happened to me daily from when I was born till now," she says, adding that her life circumstances motivate her to work harder to achieve her goal of becoming a pediatrician.

So far, not unlike any other child born into difficult circumstances. Maria has no problems living within her means. What galls her, however, is that *as a black person* she is living below community standards. "*It fulfills the whole stereotype that blacks don't have as much money and can't get a good education as a result. Maybe (I wouldn't mind) being seen as The Rich Black Girl!*" she laughs. James agrees. "*People will judge you as (a poor black person) if you can't afford the \$600 watch. (When I find myself in that situation) it's kind of upsetting because people are judging you (as a black person).*"

Adds Nikita "We feel this way because they already kind of expected that of you. It's not really a big thing. Its like 'Oh well, so you're poor. Aren't you supposed to be? Aren't you used to that by now? Aren't you all poor?" (Nikita bolsters her story with an illustration of her Mom's doctor, whom she said was constantly pulled over by police in Toronto because he drove a very nice Benz around in the ritzy neighborhood where he lived. He eventually moved to the States.) "You just feel out of place", she concludes about her high school life.

But how do these young people, whose finances limit their involvement in activities popular with their non-black peers, know what their peers are trying to communicate to them? "*You feel it in body language*", says James. "*Its like silent racism and you can feel it*", Nikita continues. "*It's the way they treat you or not treat you.*" James adds, "*Some people make black jokes about me. But once I started working and driving they are like 'What's up, James'. Can you give us a ride? Then the next time I go to say hi, they turn away.*"

But for some of the youth the issue is not just in having or not having money. It's about personal values. Mr. D's family income exceeds \$100,000. "*There's nothing wrong with having money. My parents can afford to go buy this and that and give it to me. But they don't. They make me go out and work for it. That way I appreciate it.*" 'Will', whose parents own a 4-bedroom house in Glen Abbey says that his parents can more than afford to buy him all he needs. He also works. He marvels at friends who get everything yet don't appreciate it.

Chapter 9 – “If I’m truly part of this Community Why Am I Being Singled Out?”

Even when they choose to define themselves in ways other than race, such as a common socioeconomic background, smarts or good manners, many black youth feel that ultimately, it comes down to race. Its almost as though the very closeness and familiarity on which the community hopes to build social capital and committed citizens breeds the kind of contempt that causes young blacks to question the extent to which their race will ever be a non-issue. They see it in use of the ‘N’ word by friends. The youth are at best ambivalent about the use of the word by anybody, including blacks. One young woman patiently explains the difference between using the term *Nigga*, popular with black entertainers – as in “What’s up, Nigga” – and *Nigger*, as used by whites and always viewed as derogatory. The first is an expression among ‘family members’, she says, meaning other blacks. The second is off-limits. There is even a female version ‘*Niggerette*’ according to interviewee Shelly.

Either way, use of the term, particularly by non-blacks, offends black youth. They distrust the intentions of the non-black person using it and they resent the assumption that friendship entitles such a user to appropriate an expression that belongs only in ‘the family’, as Shelly explains:

“ The other day somebody (white) called me a red nigger [(a term sometimes used in the Caribbean to describe light-skinned blacks)]. I haven’t heard that expression in years. I remember somebody told me I was a red nigger once back home but they were black. We always used to joke about it...(Back home) you don’t see it as being racist because you are surrounded with black people. When a black person calls you a red nigger and a white person does that it’s totally different.”

We had heard similar stories from other youth. “ *There’s this Filipino guy at school and he’s always trying to act black. He’s like ‘Whassup my Nigger’ I don’t like it. Even when I see other blacks do it. Why don’t they just call me by my name?*” Mista Smith asks. It seems that Mista Smith’s Mom’s attempt to make him feel better by telling him that the term is Spanish for black did not help.

Shelly’s experience with name-calling, however, had a slightly different twist. It appears that the white youth who used it was neither trying to be friendly or offensive. Apparently, the incident took place at a basketball game when a black player was benched. Shelly’s friend, who is black said something about the red nigger being benched. (“He was just saying so for saying so sake”, Shelly says.) The white youth who overheard asked her, “So you would be considered a red nigger right?” Shelly, however, was not inclined to use this question as a teaching point. “ I said to him, ‘Excuse me? You hear a black person say it so you think it’s safe to call me a red nigger? If it was a black person who said that I wouldn’t think twice

about it. But to think that a white person thinks it's O.K.... No." Shelly, who came to Oakville from the Caribbean two years ago, continues:

"The first time a person called me a nigger I didn't know what to do. I was traumatized! I couldn't say anything. I just looked at the person like, What did you just say? You really need to repeat it because I really think you said something I know you shouldn't say. I was like Wha'?"

Feeling singled out can happen when the reverse of name-calling takes place: when the person cannot even acknowledge the youth's race. One of Shelly's classmates wanted to tell her that she looks like a particular black soccer player, but couldn't bring himself to use the word 'black'. It is difficult for the young black person to know whether an inquiring question comes out of a genuine desire to understand, or whether it is just one more manifestation of stereotyping.

For instance, Mista Smith's friend, who is Korean, tells him about the fear that people in Korea had during the World Cup that black visitors would steal from them. "He said that in their movies black people were always the ones in jail. He asked me what would I do if someone called me a nigger. He always expects me to run over and beat the person up. And then one person in gym class was like (in a whisper) 'Nigger, Nigger' and then he's like, 'I'm just joking. I'm just joking!'" Mista Smith holds both arms up in a self-defense mode to show how the boy tried to protect himself because he expected to be hit. Gentle and unassuming, Mista Smith hardly seems the sort who would attack anyone.

Stereotyped

This theme of being stereotyped as aggressive runs through many of the interviews.

"People when they see me tend to think 'Oh, she is hostile, she is ignorant, which I am totally not. I ask questions, I try to educate myself, but people tend to think I know what I want, I'm going to say it and I'm loud...and I'm mean...At first when people meet me they tend to be quiet, like they think [I am] is aggressive...or I'm snooty or stuck-up and won't want to talk to them because they are white or of a different race. They tend to think I know what I want and I'm strong and I'm going to get it. I'm like, 'I'm just as confused as you are. I'm only 16!"

Many youth feel that in certain stores people stare at them. For the young men it's when they have their toque on, even if they are not wearing the dreaded baggy pants. Asked how that makes him feel one 16 year-old replies, "(people) think you must feel powerful (being dressed this way) but it's not really nice." They speak of walking down sidewalks and older couples clearing the way for them. Or entering elevators and having mothers pull their children closer or grabbing their purses more tightly. The young woman who grew up in northern Ontario spoke of being "traumatized" by her early experiences. These experiences,

she said, preconditioned her to expect the worst when interacting with other races. Although she lived only two years in Oakville, she brought the filter with her.

Black youth use a number of tactics for deflecting the hurt of being stereotyped. Stereotypes of the youth are not much different than those in the big city. There is an expectation that they are violence-prone, they carry guns and they do drugs.

“(Non-black) people always approach me for drugs. They always come to me and say like, ‘So you got any marijuana? I don’t know why. They just come up to me. I’m like No!’”
(Mista Smith, 16)

“In Oakville there’s a big drug scene. It’s mostly the white people who are into it. We are not into it. They are into drugs like mad and they are always asking if you want to buy some or if you are selling. They tend to be like, well shouldn’t you be into drugs? Well I have no interest in drugs. Says Mary, a 19-year-old university student:

“It’s a whole stereotyping thing. I don’t know why, this guy came up to me. And was like, “I got some fried chicken and watermelon in my car. Want some?’ Let’s go to my house and watch some BET.”

“They always say that and I’m like ‘that’s an American down-South thing. It’s not even African Canadian. Why would you come to me and ask something as stupid as that? Why?’”
(Natasha, 16)

Negative expectations extend to behavior. *“When I’m around whites I am conservative, quiet. When I’m with other blacks I’m different. (But then) I ask myself why is my finger up? Why is my neck wobbling? Why am I falling into that stereotype? It’s almost like a subconscious thing. It’s almost disturbing”.* (Mary, 19)

Asked why she is quieter among whites she replies, *“I don’t know why. I guess it’s to fit in. You hear the stereotypes about being loud or aggressive. (But) when you are among your own kind you feel it’s O.K. because you know they know about it. They are not going to judge you on it. When you are among whites and other races you try not to show it. You’re like, ‘You are not going to put me in a mould. No, I am conservative. I’m quiet. I can answer as many questions as you. You try not to let them get to you or try to say anything bad about you.’”*

Being stereotyped can cause even black youth to stereotype each other. *“My Mom tells me I should go out and mix with other races. But the problem is I don’t get a chance to be with black people enough so when I see black ‘thugs’ on the street even I get a little nervous ‘cause I don’t know how to act around them. At school I’m quiet around white people. I ask questions but I don’t really talk that much because I talk about black music and stuff (but*

others don't understand). It's kinda bad 'cause I can talk to them about their music." (Mista Smith).

They even stereotype themselves. Mista Smith admits that when he was younger he thought that because he was black he was the fastest runner. His friend told him that blacks had specially built calves to enable them to jump higher. Another friend told him that blacks' bodies were stronger because slaves needed to be strong and the weaker ones were killed off -- presumably a form of natural selection. In high school he realized that whites could beat him. Then he saw US sprinter Marion Jones lose to a white runner and wondered, "How could that happen?"

According to many of the youth, negative reactions to their race extends beyond their circle of friends at school or on the basketball court. There is the brother of one youth (whom she describes as very dark) who reported that three people left the bus as soon as he got on at the GO station, waiting for another bus to come. Another 18-year-old was sitting outside of a local restaurant after his shift waiting for his Dad, when a group of white youth in a car shouted racial epithets at him.

A young woman, now a university graduate reported a similar experience while walking along Lakeshore Rd. In her new condo, Tionne's mother got fed up of being accused of everything from dumping garbage even before she moved in, to hogging the washers in the laundry. She had just entered and had no clothes in. *"My Mom called the condo corporation and cussed them out. She was like, 'If I'd known this is what it was going to be like I'd never have moved in'. We're not even doing anything and they are just on our backs. That's one of the reasons why I hate living in this town. I wish I lived somewhere where I could relate to people like me."*

Chapter 10 – “I Know I can achieve like anyone Else, But Will the System Let Me?”

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Black youth are similarly aware of the negative stereotypes about their academic and career capabilities. For many in the study, their feelings seem to be: “I know I’m smart, but does the world think so?” This is not a new question, nor is it peculiar to Oakville. The existence and impact of low expectations on black youth has been well documented. But what happens when a family moves to a community where academic achievement is a highly prized goal, in the hopes that their children will share in the spoil? Why does the perception of low expectation so stubbornly persist? In the interviews one is struck by the number of youth who are actually earning good marks, or who believe firmly that they can. They have parents (many professionals) that are encouraging them to aim high. Some admit that they don’t try hard enough, while others, often at the urging of parents are struggling valiantly.

What hinders so many of these bright young people from embracing the assumptions common to their peers, that is, “If I do well I will reap the rewards”? In an environment of academic excellence, where do self-defeating race-based perceptions come from? We see glimpses of a heroic struggle happening inside these youth. They are aware of the awful images, they vow to defy them, but in the process sometimes fall prey to the very behavior that they are trying so hard to avoid. Or in trying to avoid it they become saddled with the “burden of the race”. For others they get painted with the negative brush no matter what they do.

“(In a new class) it’s almost like you have to prove to the teacher that you are smart. They don’t believe you at first until you have the test in your hand.” (Money)

“...The first thing (the teacher) sees is ‘O my god, this guy is going to fail, his marks are not going to be as high as the others’. But he’s surprised when he sees that first test... They don’t think we are smart [because of] the way we dress or the way we act...I don’t know. We are so smart but we just have to...” (Danger)

“You always have to show that you are not the stereotypical black. Wherever you go people have this view because most of the whites at our school they watch BET and they get the wrong impression...”You put up your hand and they (teachers) might ask you the hard question like they don’t think you know the answer” (Beats)

Money describes the time his guidance counselor discouraged him from doing a full slate of OACs because he felt it would be too tough. Money wants to be an engineer.

“They (teachers) come up to you and pat you on the back and go like ‘Good job!’ Like, ‘She got 95, wow!’ But they are saying it so loud that everyone in the class can hear. So even though they are praising you, they are still making you feel like you struggled.. They go like

'Oh, did you find it hard?' I don't need you to come up and ask me that. I knew what I was doing. Obviously I was listening...But they are taking it like 'Oh my gosh, she got it. Wow!' (Aaliyah)

What is sad about these youth's perceptions of low academic expectation is that it is possible that the teachers in question did wish them well and were happy for them, as they would be for other children. Maybe what seemed like surprise to the youth was genuine pleasure. But living in a climate of insidious stereotyping, even compliments are received with some level of suspicion. Asked whether he gets compliments from his friends about his brains as about his brawn, Mista Smith replies simply, "No, they probably don't think I'm smart." He adds that when people read his writing they don't believe he did it because they feel it's "professional". One day he was reading a book and his friend commented. "Wow, a black man who reads!" (Mista Smith seems to have a broad racial cross-section of friends). He regards the comment as "just joking". Shelly upon hearing this laughs bitterly about the saying she has heard though not necessarily in Oakville: "If you want to stop a black man from finding something, hide it in a book".

Deal With us on our Level

The study does not explore the long-term impact of negative stereotyping. The youth certainly have high aspirations. They dream of becoming journalists, engineers, physicians, a Doctor of Sociology, teachers, lawyers, architects, TV Producer and Human Resources Director. Very few aspire to the trades, even when that is what their parents do. Asked what would prevent them from accomplishing their goal, the overwhelming answer was money, or, nothing. A few said themselves or their own laziness."

"Treat us like people. Just treat us like people. Don't treat us like wild animals." (JFK Lee, 17)

Asked what advice they would give to regional leaders, the youth reply:

"You just need to know the youth. If you know the youth you'll realize that black people are not much different than white people. People are people. If you take a random group of people there's going to be huge differences with them [but] a lot of people will live up to what stereotype they should fall into. It's already been pre-set for them. If you are a black male you are definitely a target, no matter what. You are going to grow up that way until you realize it's not just about that, it's you making bad decisions." (Will, 16)

"The biggest racist is the guy who says he is not racist. If you're going to say 'I'm not racist. I'm not racist, it's the biggest crap in the world. Personally, I'm racist against everybody equally. I might hate the Chinese because he looks like this. I might hate the Italian because he does this. I might hate blacks because a lot of blacks are, well, just assholes. A lot of whites are assholes too. I might hate black girls because a lot of them are just stuck up. They're

brought up that way. I might hate white girls because a lot of them are just 'ho's.... I'm racist to everybody fairly...but at least I admit it. A guy will sit in a corner and go 'I like black people, I'm not racist. Ya. But do you know what, get the hell of my property.' He's racist, plain and simple." (Geevs)

"Deal with human beings on their level. Everyone is different in their own way. For the majority, some black people are hostile, as in more loud..." (Mr. D.)

" You wouldn't go up to a German and (criticize the way he speaks). Germans are aggressive speakers. Yet you have never heard of a German just walking up and shooting someone for no reason... You don't hear of black guys going and terrorizing countries...Black people settle grudges one and one. White people just take it all out. I was fired so...." (Geevs)

"They bring their friends in. It's not just one on one." (Will)

One feature that stands out among the youth is their determination to pursue career, work and academic goals with a vengeance, regardless of their social challenges. They work hard outside of school as well. According to Statistics Canada figures prepared by the Halton Social Planning Council, black youth earn on par with other youth. The statistics from the 1996 Census also show that among blacks 20-24 in Oakville, 45% were in university and 39% were pursuing "non-university education" and 16% had their secondary school certificate.

According to the all-male group:

"You have to work for your family. (Our parents) bust their asses...If we drop out of college, we are dead men. Your parents expect you to (achieve). They're like, I'm not going to bust my ass so you can sit at home. White kids get everything they want."

"Our views will be different, seeing that we are black youth...because we have to...fight to get what we deserve. We had slavery and it makes us push even harder to be who we...want to be....just strive for the best because of how we were treated before...." (Shakira)

This theme of `fighting' is a popular one throughout the groups. Fighting for marks from teachers they feel have "undermarked" them. Fighting for respect. Fighting to beat the odds of what society expects of them. One 14-year-old felt that her generation does not expect blacks "to be drop outs or anything", compared with the older teens' generation. At the same time, the 14-year-old says, she feels that her peers expect her to be "an average student".

Chapter 11 – “Fit In While Remaining Unique? How Do I Do That?”

Black youth cannot always look to parents for models of how to negotiate their place in Oakville society, since the vast majority of parents have re-located here from other communities within or outside of Canada, where their relationships with the majority white culture might have been different. These past relationships may not fit the uniqueness of the Oakville milieu, however. We see evidence of this in the interviews where some parents exhort their children to be mindful of their blackness as a way of pursuing success, while other parents urge them not to. Paul Willis, in a study of black youth in Great Britain points out:

“Young people can never look wholly to the prior generation for clues about how to develop their own identities. The experience of the two generations differ, and some cultural commonalities with white youth must arise from their shared conditions of life commonly experienced.”²⁰

So what happens when the young person considers her race to be an integral aspect of who she is? In other words, she is not only a person who happens to be black, she is a *black* person? In the words of one 16-year-old interviewee, *“Don’t view me as just a black person, but do understand that I am black and that when you make racial comments, they do insult me. I am black and I don’t forget that but there is more to me than that.”*

A mother of two teenagers puts it this way:

“I think one of the main issues that we as black people need to address is our identity, because black people whether they are young or old do not seem to know their identity. Yes there is racism, there’s always going to be racism. But the identity part I find very disturbing, if you ask an Italian, what is your identity they are Italian first... You ask a black person about their identity we have African American, we’ve got African, West Indian, Jamaican. We are broken up into all these little sectors. We’re black people, and we are seen by everyone else out there no matter where you were born they look at you, you’re black doesn’t make any difference where you were born, we are black people.”

In her study of Fernwood School in South Africa, Nadine Dolby tackles this question in her interviews with black and white students about their relationships with each other. First, Dolby stresses, when one lives in a multi-racial milieu race *is* a valid social category within which to identify oneself. It’s the *meaning* attached to this category that is in “constant flux” as it re-creates itself in response to its surroundings. Race then becomes the wild card in the young person’s *‘shared conditions of life’* with people of other races.

“I remember when I was in Grade 9. Some people just would not associate with you. And then what they do is find this one black person that they consider cool...All I know is that it

²⁰ Dolby, Ibid,

went from Grade 9 and people not talking to you much (to being this super popular person). They have this fakeness where they pretend to know you at a certain point and disown you at another point."

Says Maria, who is bi-racial, "It's cool to be black now." Her friends, however, remind her that she is really only 'half' black. *"This makes me angry because if I can feel the isolation of racism then I'm enough black to be called black. I get the bad effects of it so why can't I say I'm black too?"* Maria says that in her school there are two 'cool groups' – white and the black. To the white group, some of her friends are 'ethnic', although they look almost white. Other 'ethnics' are actually black, and "have become cool now because of the hip hop". Then there are the blacks that have their own group. Because she lives in a predominantly white area, Maria says, many of her friends are white, although she has other 'ethnic' friends, such as South Asians.

"In the school you can feel the tension", she says, especially when teachers try to get the black/'ethnic' 'cool group' to turn down the hip-hop music they are playing. The teachers say that other students are afraid of passing through the area of the building where the black kids "chill". The blacks/ethnics retort that the white kids are not asked to turn down their music.

One father, whose children are now grown, argues:

"How do we fit in? All the problems that we have expressed here tonight (about black youth) seem to me to be the normal daily living for any minority. You are the person, you could stiffen your back and say, I'm going to stand up for my rights, however you want to approach a problem. ... Sometimes it's ourselves that make or break the ...way that (others) perceive us."

Mixed Messages

Other parents seem to agree, basically saying, yes, discrimination is out there, but it happens mostly with the adults – being passed over for promotions; having employers bypass them for members of other ethnic groups because they feel that "we blacks are always trying to prove that we are more than they think we are." That parents play a critical role in shaping black youth interpretation of day-to-day experiences became clear after the very first focus group. Equally compelling, however, were the clear signals that the youth are getting mixed messages...sometimes from the same parent. Some feel pressured by these messages, while others urge their peers to look beyond their parents' own uncertainty about the right message and to focus on the intent.

At first blush, it seems like parents are almost pre-conditioning their children to expect race-based difficulties in Oakville and beyond. Says Nikisha: *"My Mom always said look at race first (and that) helped me accomplish what I want to get. My Mom always taught me that*

because you are black, you're always going to be held down. So you need to fight harder...to accomplish your goals."

"My parents were always telling me that even though being black doesn't really matter, living in certain areas of society where black people have (are seen as having) that negative aspect, you have to fight harder for what you want. People will always be trying to hold you down....If you're a black person, your outlook on life will be completely different from a Caucasian, or Indian or Spanish for that matter...They may not have gone through the same harsh, hostile we black people have grown up in". (Tamika)

"I grew up in Jamaica and race was never really an issue. I didn't even know white people existed till I was in high school. I moved to Canada and we had to look at race a whole different way...People treat you differently...It kind of upsets your personal beliefs because my Mom is always telling me to fight. She is always saying that people are not going to look up to [black people]." (Tionne)

"...I think its because of the way they [my parents] were brought up. They are from Africa...so the way that they were taught as children and the way they teach us affects my life also... [in] a white world..." (Monique)

Oakville and Beyond

Further conversation with the youth and adults paints a picture that is not as simple as urging racial self-consciousness among young blacks in Oakville. Rather, like their counterparts everywhere, black parents are trying to prepare their children for what they see as the inevitabilities of life. As they see it, being a *visible* minority in a predominantly white community demands positioning in one form or other. The one option that is not open to them is to not address it. The option is closed because from the youngest possible age not only will someone point out to their children the obvious – that they are black – the person will attach an interpretation as to the implications of that fact.

Throughout the interviews there is as much a sense that parents are reacting to what they see as generalized anti-black stereotyping as they are to incidents that actually happen to their children in Oakville. Take the case of one highly educated African-born mother who moved to Oakville five years ago.

"Before then we lived in (a country outside of North America), where we went to a private British school. There were very few blacks in the school. When we moved here (to Oakville), we lived in a townhouse. There was ...one incident where one of the kids in the neighborhood told my son his mom doesn't like him playing with a black boy. My son didn't tell me. Someone else told me I was so upset. I was going to take it up with the mum but I thought about it and I thought well it's her loss. Friends stopped playing with the other boy because of my son, the boy's mum came to my door and asked me to explain what was going on and to

apologize. So we talked about it and it turned out that when she told her son not to play with the Blacks she didn't mean my son...."

So far, a run of the mill incident between children of two races, until we note the reaction of the other parents around the table when they heard her last sentence: "... *When she told her son not to play with blacks she didn't mean my son...*" The parents' reaction is a mix of incredulity and knowing looks that say, "I know that line". What does the line mean? Well, it means that here is a mother whose child is being boycotted by others on the street for refusing to play with their black friend, who now realizes her error and wanted to make peace. But the murmurs of the other parents and the dry humorless laugh of the mother giving the account said something else. It harked back to the lines they have heard from well-meaning people outside of their race. "*You are so different*". "*It's those other blacks that are causing the problem*". "*Some of my best friends are black*".

It reminded me of an account by another successful black professional woman, when she was about to sell her home in the mature neighborhood where she had lived for a number of years. Solicitous neighbors came over to express how sorry they were to see her go. And oh by the way, she was not thinking of selling to 'those people', was she? What people, she inquires sweetly. Well, you know, blacks, Indians, Chinese.... The seller took the opportunity to remind her neighbors that she too is black. One can only imagine the embarrassment and hasty apologies. Of course they did not mean blacks like *her*. It's those *other* blacks they want to keep out.

It was probably the first time the R word had ever been uttered between them over the years during which she became 'one of them'. The neighbors' miscalculation, however, is one of the sad but true realities of life as a black person even in situations where they achieve status as 'one of the gang'. It's this miscalculation from which black parents feel compelled to shield their children.

But how do you do that while also communicating to your children that they are just people like everyone else, that race does not matter, that they are in one of the nicest municipalities in Canada as equal participants? You tell them to be full participants in society then you worry if they will be targeted because of their race. In other words, you unwittingly let your own mixed feelings show. Reminiscing on how her sense of isolation dissipated after new colleagues began to accept her one mother commented: "*I thought to myself, this is exactly what happens to my kids in school, when they first went to school there was this isolation at first but once they got comfortable with the kids they didn't see race after a while.*"

Porous Borders

Other parents are not so sure:

“They (my children) get angry come Friday night when I say no, they can’t go out. (If) they can’t get home by 10-11 o’clock, I’m still worried about them. (There’s) this maternal instinct that says (to them): Don’t bump anyone. Don’t touch anyone. Everyday you hear of someone getting shot.... I always worry about them when they go out. Parents try to protect the kids – do they appreciate what parents have done for them. They don’t understand that you are trying to protect them.”

There has never been a shooting of a black youth in Oakville. Yet this mother is operating within a societal framework that does not end at the Mississauga border. She is a black parent of black teenagers. Her worries may not be as acute as those of the inner city mother, but they are there deep in her subconscious mind. And they impact the messages she transmits to her children as to how they should behave, even though they live in Oakville. The mother of the little black boy who was about to rejoin his friend down the street will not tell her son to be careful in how he plays for fear he will be seen as a threat and targeted. But she transmits a message that carries just as much impact on that boy’s sense of ownership on Oakville:

“...[W]e are black parents. To survive here you have to beat the white man at his own game. [I tell my children that] they have to excel; that they shouldn’t forget that they are black; that for them to be comfortable they have to work extra hard.”

In a youth focus group, aspiring journalist, Natasha, tries to put the messages she receives into perspective:

“These messages came to me from my father. He came from Jamaica and he always struggled and didn’t get to finish school so he is not as accomplished as he thought he would be. So he tries to show me all these bad things that can happen to me because I am black and I’m female. (He says) ‘they are going to see your face before they see your resume’...”

This is how one mother sees mixed messages:

“The other day and I was sitting there and I was looking at my sister and it finally dawned on me. Do you know what, we are the problems for the youth. We are sending this message and they are getting mixed messages. ‘Stand proudly, tall and black. Be proud of who you are.’ But yet you’re saying ‘try and forget that you are black. Sometimes you can get into the white side to be a part of (your other friends’ activities).’ So your kids are ...all confused. ‘What do you want me to be? Am I supposed to be black or whitewashed?’ That’s what some of them are labeled. You are whitewashed because you go to the ballet, opera, you drink wine at supper time. I love my black culture. There’s still a part of me that is the way I was raised. I love my heritage.”

The uncertainty as to how they should position their children’s thinking about themselves and their place in society becomes clear in the focus groups. One parent declares that, “if our kid

comes home and says that he was beaten up ... because he was black and you accept that then (we) are not giving your child a good lesson". Yet later she has this to say:

"...Being brought up in Africa, (and) not growing up in an environment where I was in a minority my comment in regards to the issue of race is, how much of the emphasis that we as black people (have on race) is acting as an impediment to the achievement of these kids? I sat with my son one day with the Toronto Star a couple of weeks, ago they did a whole series of racial profile of Toronto, and he said, Why do those people act like this? How can I make sure that I don't get in trouble? They – the police – treat me the way they want. I said, look at this way: 'You're going to school, you're going to do well and you will succeed. That should be your primary concern. Because of the color of your skin you should be aware that there are pitfalls, just be aware that there are pitfalls (but) don't let it be the primary concern of your being that you are black.' The moment they make it the central concern of [their] being then it distracts from their focus to succeed. I don't want to make the system different. The balance between white and black and succeeding (is) being aware of color, I think. But go to school and do well."

Blackness as an Advantage

Parents are acutely aware that when they tell their children what they have been through they pass the emotions on to them. Part of the parents' own identity crisis stems from their location –at least for some of them – as immigrants and as such victims of the immigrant's drive to give his or her children a better life. For some it means losing the mother tongue and doing what's necessary to not stand out. For others it means telling them they cannot help but be who they are, so instead they should use their blackness to their advantage. Some parents support the creation of cultural opportunities such as a dance program being offered by the Caribbean Association, while others take their children to Toronto to attend Black Heritage classes. The dilemma as to how to prepare their youth to participate fully in Oakville is perhaps reflected best in the observation by the president of the Canadian Caribbean Association regarding black parents' support of the program:

"This class is an opportunity for the kids to interact. It really doesn't matter what they do once they start to interact. It's an excuse to interact. I'm very pro insisting that there is cultural interaction amongst my race. I am very strong and very forceful about that. I react with some disappointment when I observe other parents who do not have the same level of passion for wanting to voluntarily make sure that even as the program changes that they are not ...finding some other excuse to keep it together. "

There is general agreement that black parents need to interact more among themselves to set an example to their children. But who these black families are is not just defined by race. It's defined by culture – after all 'black' is really a skin color that unites people from a wide range of cultures and societies. Says one parent:

“Some ethnic groups are close knit, Chinese, Japanese, Korean ...they all really have sort of the same background. They are all Asian but they tend to separate themselves into different groups. The same happens with the blacks... Jamaicans, Africans and Indians and all the different ethnic groups. They’ll separate themselves into groups even though when you look at it they’re all basically from the same background and the same culture. I even have a friend and he’s African. If someone calls him Jamaican he’ll correct everyone.”

Relationships among black parents in Oakville are also influenced by class. According to one mother:

“I would like to think that I am focused on where my kids are in their minds and where they want to go because I’m actually more confused about my reason for being here...I think of people that I know here and people that I thought I would be able to socialize actively with them when I came here. I knew that from a perception standpoint ...whether it’s real or not (that) I wasn’t quite on their level. I learned that pretty darn quickly. (So) I spent more time focusing on my kids and trying to steer them through the confusion.”

The mother continues:

“How is it [possible] not to be living through your children as you try to work through your own sense of fear? As immigrants we come to better ourselves and to live for our children (but) in that process there’s all this unpacking which many of us haven’t done because we’re too busy living life, trying to survive, trying to get where we want to go.... Kids become caught.”

Black and Proud

The difficulty of unpacking is quite vivid through the experiences of this mother.

“I go to my kids school every so often and I will sit at the back and monitor what the teacher is doing. They don’t realize, black kids are picked on more than the others. The teacher does not notice but I picked it up and the kids will too. I told the teacher that her teaching technique stinks [and that she] favors the child that is sitting right in front or the child that dresses differently or sitting straight. Two children didn’t raise their hands for the entire class they just sat back scribbling, playing, they whisper they’re not learning anything.”

These two children were black. The mother stops short of attributing the teacher’s inattention to race – “ youth use the racial thing as a crutch”. She scolds her son for not doing his homework yet complaining that the teacher is picking on him. On the other hand, here is how she sums up her children’s experience as a whole:

“When I was growing up my mother would say to me, you have to do this: you have to be better [and] you have to watch your step. When I am dealing with my children ...I say, ‘In your conduct you have to watch yourself [and] you have to be the best. We set the standards for our children so high. I also tell them, no one owes you anything, but the color of your skin is black and it doesn’t make any difference in how well educated you are or what position you have in life. You always have to strive to prove to them that you are better. And so yes, I do set high standards for my children and I hope that they live up to that standard ... In doing all of that hopefully we will not teach them the negativity around always assuming that when things don’t work their way, [they can] use the excuse, because the color of their skin, because they are black.”

So even as they tell their children to be ‘black and proud’, parents extol the benefits of participating fully in society.

“We are the biggest problem that the kids have today, we are sending mixed messages. We say hold on, then we say fight as soon as a problem comes up... A lot of people are not talking about it because they don’t want to be seen as a failure or (as) someone who doesn’t fight back, (yet) they don’t want their kids to look at them and think that (they are) ignorant... I told my children stand up for your rights. Stand up for yourself. Don’t back down from anyone. Don’t let anything or anyone stand in your way. If you see something you want and know that you can get it because you’ve got the ability, reach for it don’t stop until you reach it. On the other hand you’ve got to be better than the white person, you’ve got to be better than your friend and then you’ve got to be black, you’ve got to hold onto your culture, you’ve got to hold on to your being black.”

The youth, in one parent’s words, feel “gratitude” for the opportunity to live in Oakville. So much so, some feel youth may not be describing the true extent of race-related difficulties to

their parents. This is not a major questioning point in the interviews, but we do see evidence of youth involving their parents when they have difficulties at the institutional level – such as with school or landlord – but not at a peer level. One young woman actually said only half-jokingly, “I didn’t want to tell my Mom [about the problems she was having with a teacher]. She’s an African woman”. From the laughter around the table the implication was clear: “She takes no guff.” We saw other cases of parents challenging principals, a condo corporation and, in one instance, police officers who wanted to know why their teenaged son, a driver, was out after 10 at night.

The sense of ‘parents know best’ permeates even the most discontented youth. Many share the feelings of this mother of nine:

“Parents live here because it’s safe, it’s a nice place to raise kids and that’s one of the reasons I moved here, it’s quiet and away from the hectic life of Toronto, and Scarborough, which was a hustle bustle place, a keep going, going kind of thing. The more I looked at my kids the more I saw that they were growing too fast and absorbing too (many) things that I didn’t want them to absorb, so then I moved to (a southern Ontario town) and then to Oakville. The kids don’t like it here (but) I am here to do this as a favour to the kids...”

Another mother, who grew up in Oakville, points out:

“On the one hand you want to live near black families (yet) on the other hand there is the stigma by society as to who and what they are. You think that by coming here you become less of that and yet when you’re here you wish for it, you wish for the good things about being in a community with many blacks. My reality is based on what I’m given. How do I allow my children to grow and to be successful and to be part of a community? I like Oakville, I like ...the fact that there are [fewer] black people here, [yet] I wish there were more... We knew all the black people in the city of Oakville when I was 5, 10, 15 but now it is very different.”

A Mind of their Own

What do black youth make of this dual messaging? The youth seem for the most part to be influenced by their parents’ worldview – but not entirely. Says Shakira: “I don’t let what they say be my number one choice. It’s what my heart feels is right...But I also take race in consideration because racism is not totally gone yet. It’s always going to be there and it’s always going to be seen as a negative factor...” Tionne agrees: “I try not to let the negative side of how black people are seen...[affect me].” Natasha too tries to put her father’s warnings into perspective: “I understand that but I try to tell him ‘don’t try to scare me’. It’s a kind of encouragement if you want to call it that but it kind of makes me want to pull back and say ‘what’s the use of doing [well] if they are only going to see me as a black person?’”

Their parents' mixed feelings add another layer of subtlety to the youth's effort to define themselves not only relative to their white peers, but also vis-à-vis their friends in Mississauga and Toronto. Dr. Carl James explains... “

(There are) kids ... who will ... identify very strongly with the ... social mobility of parents. They will see Oakville as the idea of mobility for them and ... therefore while they like Oakville and also hate it at the same time, they also recognize what it represents to them as blacks. Those who might not share their parents' idea of social mobility might have internalized their idea of social mobility but at the same time do not give it as much credence as others might. (To them) ... Oakville might be taken for granted as (just) a location.”

Some of the interviews support this proposition.

Regardless of how they communicate – or *mis*-communicate – to their children about their place in Oakville society, one element remains constant: black parents carry enormous concerns about their children. One father, whose son has had run-ins with the law, concluded after listening a long time to the discussion among the other parents:

“I have to say ... I think it's a miracle that some of our kids made it... I believe that there is racism, that our kids are going through hell... I believe (that) we have not learned how to overcome some of these issues, we have not learned how to actually open doors. And I find a lot of us send our kids mixed messages. I did not grow in the environment my kids do. When these kids come to you with a problem, most of the time you don't have the time to process with the kid... The other kids they have to confront are very mean.

“Some of the things he encountered, I didn't know about. (Some) say that the problems are the same for white youth and black youth. I beg to differ... Most of the kids have potential, (even if) somehow they're lazy and not motivated. If you take the same black kid and put in an environment where other black kids are excelling you'd see a big difference. These kids need something to help motivate them to move forward. My son has potential but (he gets) mixed messages at home. He goes to the school, (he) tries to mix with the white kids. He wants to excel. He wants to go forward. He needs motivation.”

Chapter 12 – “Too Black to Be White, Too White to Be Black”

Who came up with the black image anyway? One mother asked the question but it might have well been asked by a youth. They too ask it in different ways. As it relates to image, it is a question that for that matter could be asked about Oakville as well. Where did this notion come from that *everybody* in Oakville is rich, self-absorbed and owner of an SUV? Throughout the interviews youth and their parents struggle to situate themselves within what in diversity practice is known as ‘the mythical norm’.

The humorous quality about a mythical norm – actually, it would be humorous, if it didn’t have such tragic implications – is that no one, including the person on whom it is modeled, fits the mold completely. So the star athlete has a soft spot for fuzzy chickens. Or the man-about-town actually spends Saturday nights with his grandmother. The *bling bling*-bedecked hip-hop artist represents a mere fashion icon for the black youth similarly attired: he has no aspiration towards the artist’s lifestyle or values.

So where *do* these images come from and what impact do they have on the way youth in Oakville define themselves? The obvious answer is media – and not necessarily Oakville media either. The long arm of what youth invariably describe as ‘hip-hop culture’ or ‘BET culture’ reaches across the silver screen to add another layer of complexity to their quest to define themselves relative to the community in which they live.

Most parents hate it: youth alternate between hating it for arbitrarily creating the image of who they supposed to be and defending their right to choose whomever they wish as their fashion inspiration. Young black teens deal with this pre-destined image in their own way. Young women fight to protect their dignity from it, in the process sometimes resorting to the very elements that it prescribes for them; young men alternately resist it and capitalize on it. The struggle with ‘BET culture’ is, for black youth, their own version of the struggle with the mythical norm. They may share some of its features but, for the most part, it does not represent who they are.

In the eyes of black parents, however, the mythical norm is very much a reality – a reality they hope their children will escape. “I hate the way they dress’, one mother says softly as she laments her inability to persuade her 16-year-old son to wear “nice” clothes, rather than the “big, baggy” ones he favors. Two factors fuel parents’ distaste for what they see as pre-conditioned images for their children. First, it limits their reference points. “I love different types of music and I want (my son) to learn about different types of music”, asserts one mother, who immigrated to Oakville from Britain. “Ragga, soul, violin, you name it. It’s good that they have a wide choice. I don’t want him to see images of black women with everything out in the front and the back.” She likens these sexualized images to her children learning only about slavery but not of ancient African kingdoms.

Sixteen-year-old Will describes himself as a born-again Christian. His religion is unaffected by his race. His heritage is mixed – he has Chinese, French and black – but this is not what defines him, he says. He is black – “I’m not white” – but acknowledges that compared to the other focus group members, his features, which could be mistaken for anything from Spanish to Arab, temper people’s reaction to him. As a matter of fact, compared to ‘JFK Lee’ whose friends deserted him for ethnic-specific groupings in high school, Will kept his middle-school friends. If he wears a do-rag, people will either ask him, “Are you black” or assume he is black. He does not feel racially targeted in stores.

“It depends on their classification of black. If they think that being black is someone who runs around in gangs and stuff, then I’m not black. If a black person is...how would you define a black person? It’s tough. A black person is not much different from a white person... If I dressed as the stereotypical black people would give me funny looks. It was cold and I was walking out of the store with my hood on. Someone came up to me and said, ‘Watch out gangster’.”

The antidote to the mythical norm is a healthy, realistic self-image—preferably one determined by the youth themselves. So far what we have seen are youth who either reject the ‘gangsta rap’ profile, refusing to wear the clothes or paraphernalia, or youth that wear the stuff, but for whom it is simply clothes in which they are comfortable, or which express their sense of style. But living in a community that lacks reinforcement for diverse expressions of self, black youth face an added challenge of defining their self- image without the benefit of environmental supports their white counterparts enjoy. It seems that wherever they turn in popular culture, the messages they receive confirm the negative or limited understanding of who they are by those around them.

Need for Reinforcement

This challenge is not unique to living in Oakville or Halton. It is, however, intensified when a community defines itself in such a way that excludes black youth reality. If the community seems to have no room for the shades of black identity, then it is left to the network of reinforcement that the youth put together themselves, to position them in their community. As with youth in general, self-image is critical to social participation. It is for this reason that *identity-foreclosed* youth (described earlier in this report) form the kind of weak social bonds that facilitate anti-social behavior, or at a minimum, reduce social participation.

Parents step in to fill the gap. One British-born mother says she is “trying to reinforce with (her children) to love the way they are...hoping that they will overcome a lot of problems for once they are confident in themselves...what other people say will rebound off them”. Her 6-year-old daughter has been teased on the school bus about her hair. She tells her daughter that her schoolmates wish they could braid hair like hers and that makes her feel better. The woman’s husband on the other hand, who attended mostly black schools in England and grew

up with mostly black friends. “regret(s) for (his) son that he’s not having the same (affirming) experience.” One university graduate points out about her high school days:

“As much as my Mom say yes, I think you’re cute, don’t listen to them...It’s your Mom, you know. You feel that your Mom is compelled to tell you these things. It helps for the moment. But to go back to the playground the next day knowing that my Mom thought differently didn’t help me. It didn’t give me any way of combating the name-calling. I needed to hear it from other places. I needed to see it in magazines. I needed to have things where I could see people that looked like me...big butts and thick thighs, not totally skinny with long, flowing hair....”

She had just moved from Grade Six in a multicultural school in Toronto to a school in Oakville that had only three blacks.

Another college co-ed talks of going out with her white girlfriends. *“The guys are standing there looking at you, but you don’t really feel that it’s you they are looking at. You know that it’s the tall, blond, blue-eyed type that they are after. After being constantly, constantly looked over, it is so hard on a girl’s self-esteem...(You begin to think), I guess I’m not really an attractive person.”*

Anyone who grew up plump, with acne or wearing glasses can identify with these girls. The added trouble for young black women, however, is they don’t have the option of losing a hundred pounds and appearing on *A Makeover Story*. They can’t import the latest wonder cream from Europe. They can’t ditch their glasses for contacts. They look to their environment to confirm whom their parents, aunts and other womenfolk say they are. The Ghetto Queen image stares right back at them. Mind you, as Jada says, the lessons parents instill at an early age do find a place in youth’ psyche. *“What (my parents) instilled in me about being strong, about being different made me stand up for myself...as one in how many hundreds. That’s what built my self-confidence.”*

No Ghetto Queen Here

He sister, a recent university Science graduate points out, however, that as a child she was chubby. *“You can grow out of being chubby but you can’t grow out of being black. You look at me you see a black person. When people say that when they look at me they see only a person I go ‘What are you lying for? The first thing you see when you look at me is the color of my skin. That’s who I am. Don’t be ashamed of it and say you don’t see it’.”* In other words, the youth say, who you are is different from your physical attributes. And they link who they are with the experiences that confirm or contest who *they* think they are. Refusing to see the impact of the black experience they say is a product of guilt and denial over the role of race in society.

Few, if any of the youth, identified school as a major source of confirming their identity as they saw it. Eighteen-year-old Samantha attended private school in Oakville. She excelled academically and seemed to thrive socially. However:

“The archetype of beauty at my school was blond, rich, driving around in a Mercedes, grew up in Oakville their entire life, generally didn’t have too much of a religious background. I’m black, I do not drive a Mercedes, religion (is important to me)... School was so completely not me. It was so unimportant. If I tried to define myself according to the standards of my high school, I’d go insane.”

Samantha brings up the flip side to the young women’s quest for sexual affirmation—the assumption that because they are black, they will automatically fall for ‘the new black guy’ even if by black standards he is totally undesirable. This puts a certain pressure on the few blacks that may be in a school, for example. He doesn’t want to close doors to possibilities by falling into the expectation that the black girl wins hands down; she chaffs under the assumption as well.

Black or White, He’s Not My Type

The young women in the all-female interview had strong opinions on the issue of their self-definition as black women. In the fiery discussion that marked the group we learn the following:

- Living in a predominantly white environment forces girls to deal with the issue of interracial dating head on. Some girls say they would date interracially “I’m just attracted to men, period”—while others find the notion “disgusting”.
- Some black girls see white girls as *the competition* for young black men’s attention. When her white friend challenged her on what she thought was Shakira’s disagreement with her dating a black guy, Shakira responded: “You guys think you can run around getting the black guys...You think you own them”. Her friend response: “We *know* we can get them”.
- Young black women feel caught between accepting the affections of black boys that don’t measure up to their standards and remaining dateless. Jen, the bright, articulate aspiring lawyer, relates the humorous outcome of her first conversation with ‘the new black guy’ as he tried to impress her with his hip-hop paraphernalia:

“These guys expect that we want the BET black guys, we want the thug... high school dropout. (This guy) was supposed to be in grade 12 but had failed and so he was in Grade 11 doing Grade 10 subjects. [At this point of Jen’s story in the all-girls group, the room breaks out into howls of ‘Shame!’] ‘I’m like ‘Why? How did that happen? The only way that can happen is if you don’t ever go to class. He’s like , ya, that’s what happens. He’s like I’m lazy, I go home at night and watch TV. This kid even watches the Bachelorette! You know you’re lazy when...He’s broke, he’s 17 and doesn’t even have his G1 because he doesn’t have the money. I’m like well get a job. He’s like, well I’m too lazy to look for a job’. This is the stereotype: that we are supposed to be attracted to uneducated black guys who think they are bad boys. That’s not what we want. We want educated guys who have some sense and respect women. Even the black guys are stereotyping us because they think that this will impress us!”

- Black girls feel rejected by young black men for having “too much attitude” and by young white men whose image of them is that of the neck-swiveling divas that litter popular culture. They feel that some young black men are intimidated by their career, academic and personal ambitions. They encounter men who upon hearing that they attend university, retort: “You’re washed. So what, do you think you’re better than me?”
- Black girls feel that white girls are considered more desirable because they are prepared to – how do we say this delicately – ‘put out more’. “*Black guys nowadays are the thing. The white girls are after them like white on rice*”. Putting out does not necessarily mean being sexually easy. It also includes -- to use a phrase by Brianna -- making sure that their black men are “pimped out” in the finest, compliments of the white girl.

We Won’t Pay the Price

Brianna relates a humorous story of her white girlfriend who met a black guy at the Square One bus terminal and subsequently buys him [incredibly expensive] Roca Wear items, only to have him not even remember her name when she calls him from Brianna’s phone. At this point the room erupts in groans, laughter and knowing glances. In Cristal’s view these are guys that: “are all shady. They are always trying to pick girls up... They are never in school; they have no jobs. They hang out at the bus stop like bus stop holders’. It was clear that no self-respecting black woman would even consider accepting invitations from these young men.

The moral of the story brings out Brianna’s point that if the white girl is prepared to buy the guy ‘stuff’ she earns his affection. This affection, however, often comes with strings of abuse and disrespect, which the enamored young woman seemed ready to accept. Brianna’ was incensed by ‘Mr. Bus Stop’s treatment of her friend. “I was ready to put my hand through the F...ing phone and grab him by the throat”. It is the kind of reaction to disrespect and arrogance that earns these black females their reputation of ‘attitude’ and ‘feistiness’.

From definition of self as a woman, to simply feeling like a viable part of their environment, young blacks are negotiating their way through Oakville society. Karen threw herself into her schoolwork to soothe her “discomfort” of not fitting in. Ironically, she credits living in Oakville with helping her to discover that she was “a really, really good student”. On paper, she says, she looked like a model student. Inside, she was hurting.

For Stacey, who was born in Burlington, school was something she wanted to “just hurry up and get done” so she could “get out of Oakville”. She used to get mad at her parents for not moving someplace where she could “fit in”, such as New York or the Caribbean. One of the things she disliked about her school life in Oakville was the way some black girls “hung around the white crowd trying to fit in.” They changed the way they spoke, she says, as they tried to “fit into Oakville society”. She says she had no intention of changing too and by Grade 9 she had “cut off” almost all her white friends, a classic example of Jackson and Handiman’s *immersion* stage described earlier.

Even for those youth that ‘fit in’ the story does not end there. In Samantha’s experience, “growing up in Oakville and being so influenced by white people’s music, dress, speech” resulted in her feeling “really uncomfortable” in all-black environments. *“It was nice to see people who looked like me and to know that I was not the only person out there who looks like this. But I found it really difficult to relate to (them) because we were from two completely separate environments. Basically I was in a situation where I was too black to be white and too white to be black.”*

We have heard from many youth throughout that blackness is the sum total of their psyche and their experiences. As one young woman puts it, blackness cannot be bought at a tanning salon.

Black Friends, White Friends

In the focus groups we attempt to distinguish any distinctions between younger teens (13-15) and their older counterparts, in terms of the way their identity is being shaped. Although the sample size is tiny, what we hear from them confirms findings in literature that younger children, although race conscious and capable of uttering bruising comments against their peers, tend to not have a highly developed sense of themselves as racial entities. For example, the majority of younger teens listed friends as a significant feature in defining who they are.

Only one or two of the older youth see friends as part of their defining qualities, although friends are an inseparable part of their lives. Regardless of how idyllic their pre-high school years seem, however, the arrival of ‘the new black guy’ or girl, or transfer to a new high school seems to bring these youth to a decision point about how they “define their ‘personal package’”. Stacey cut her white friends off. Janeice kept her friends, “but couldn’t identify with them anymore”. Explaining why she didn’t like to go swimming – the detangling process/hairdresser’s bills – why she had to put *grease* [hair oils/pomades] in her hair took

the edge off her friendships. She just wanted to “ sit down and talk with [her] girls”. Blacks and ‘ethnics’ in her school comprised the ‘colored table’ and they were accused of segregating themselves.

Jeffrey, who says he was very happy with his existing friends, “gravitated” to ‘the new black guy’ and they soon became inseparable. Still, he never had a core group of friends. “I never identified with any one in particular, I just sort of drifted from group to group not looking for anything in particular...I had groups of people I would do different things with because I could identify with them. If it was music, I would have one group (but) even with the blacks, I didn’t necessarily (fit in) with everything they (did) because my experience was different than theirs.” He continues the same pattern in university and says he doesn’t feel lonely. Jeffrey later concedes that it is possible that he moves from peer group to peer group because he has actually not found a peer group that reflects the ways in which he defines himself that include personal interests, culture and race.

Dating Your Own Kind

Jane as the ‘new black girl’ felt cold-shouldered by the ‘black group’ that hung out at lunch because she was light-skinned and Spanish-looking, while her more dark-skinned sister found acceptance. She retreated to the refuge of a white peer group and is now engaged to be married to a white man. “The black community needs to stop separating themselves. They separate themselves from white people and also within themselves,” Jane says. When people found out she was going to marry a white guy some (blacks) told her she should be with “own kind”. *“It really affected me. Why do I have to stick to my own kind? We are all human beings. It doesn’t matter what color we are.”*

At the end of the day there is no single image that defines black youth in Oakville. Will says he was “brought up well” in Trinidad, having attended private schools there. When his family came to Oakville, his Dad had to give up his field of work to become a self-employed tradesman. If there is any one Will strives to be like, it’s his Dad. He admires his work ethic, his care for his customers, his integrity. The music youth listen to is just as imprecise as an indicator of what it means to be black. Says Jamal:

“Black people consider me washed. But I listen to hip hop... It’s not in what I listen to or even what I do...I don’t go hard core... I know I have some styles that [one] would consider black. But I don’t consider myself white.” Adds one young university student upon hearing this: *“That’s why some blacks become confused about who they are. They don’t wear ‘thug-like clothes, they do speak English, they don’t go out and shoot up people [so they wonder if they are truly black.]”*

Another young woman remarks:

“It really bothers me when people say I’m not black enough. What is it to be black? We don’t say that girl is acting out of her whiteness or Asianness. So why is there a double standard for black girls? If we act one way we are being whitewashed. If we act black, we are being ghetto.”

You Don’t Speak like a Black Girl

For Jada, the irritation comes when people comment, “You don’t speak like a black girl, you speak like a white girl.” “What does a white girl sound like?” Jada wonders, annoyed. For Nikisha, the conflicting images lie in the mind of those outside of Oakville:

“Let’s say ...you have a person who grew up in Toronto. They’ll think that they are better than you because you grew up in Oakville around white people. They’re like, ‘Oh you’re not black enough’ or ‘Oh, you are whitewashed.’”

But, Aaliyah interjects,

“Even the people in Oakville (have these attitudes). There are these girls who just because they think that you hang around black people even though you did grow up in Oakville they think that you’re something different because they hang around white people....”

Money sums up the controversy about image:

“ All I want to say about being black is, black people should never ever say you’re not black enough because the person who made that term was white. Black enough is a black stereotype that white people put on us. If you are black, you are black enough.”

Chapter 13 – “I Am One Half of the Negotiating Team”

According to Erikson, identity formation among youth takes place as the young person and society mutually negotiate their relationship to each other.²¹ Danielsen et. al. in their comparative study of Norwegian youth explored how three of the settings within which youth find themselves – university, work and unemployment – impacted the way youth defined themselves and what is important to them. As can be expected, the researchers found significant differences among the three environments.

Most interesting in the findings, however, are the common elements that seem to put people at ease regarding their life situation: their sense of options open to them; how much leeway there is for error; and, the extent to which they have opportunity to experience and explore, rather than accept a role consigned to them by others.²² In other words, people are more contented with their choices if they feel that they are part of the negotiating team that makes decisions for them. The obvious demonstration of this in the Norwegian study is seen when youth are given the educational options available to them. Some youth who opt for trade school or to work right after high school for example, say that in retrospect their choices would have been different if they had other options meaningfully presented to them.

Historically this has been a point of contention between the black community and boards of education. From the boards' perspective, particularly on the part of guidance counselors, they provide the same information to black students that they do to others. But is this the way that black students *perceive* these efforts? We did not probe this issue directly in the focus groups, but there were a few instances of youth complaining that guidance counselors do not encourage their aspirations, or that they dissuade them from pursuing the course load that would lead to preparation for their chosen field.

Mutual negotiation as a response to exclusion is most clearly seen where the input of black youth is deliberately sought when designing social, recreational, religious or other programming. In a society with tightly held values, however, the negotiation goes to the heart of *what* is regarded as good, valuable and admirable. Unfortunately, like most other established communities, that which is considered good, valuable and admirable is often encoded in unspoken rules, unwritten expectations and unasked questions. Members of society don't have to *ask* if they should keep their lawns trimmed to two inches or if they should worship in a quiet, dignified manner. They sense the approval or disapproval rating by the reactions of those around them. Youth don't have to ask what it takes to be Big Man on Campus. Or to be The-Cool-Black-Guy-Everyone-Wants-to-Be Around. They see what

²¹ *Ibid*, Erikson, 1968

²² Danielsen, Lene M., Lorem, Astrid E., Kroger, Jane, March 2000, The Impact of Social Context of the Identity-Formation Process of Norwegian Late Adolescents", *Youth & Society*, 0044118X, Mar2000, Vol. 31, Issue 3

happens when they put on their Ralph Laurens, their Triple 5 Soul *hoodies* or their *phat* Sean Johns.

What's On the Table?

And this is the challenge laid at the doorstep of communities surrounding Toronto, such as Oakville. Before change can happen, the entire community will have to mutually negotiate what is on the change table (no pun intended) and what isn't. This involves asking the hitherto unasked questions, verbalizing the rules and if necessary putting the expectations in writing. For example, what is a young black person to make of a presumably well-intended compliment like "You're so different!" or "Wow, you scored 95!" or "I don't see your race". Do they say "Thank You"? Or do they question sweetly (or irritably) "Different than what or from whom? From the other black kids that listen to Soca and Snoop Dog rather than Clint Black like I do? From those who challenge your condescending attitude?" Do they say "Thank you. I know you are happy about my accomplishment?" Or do they ask, "Why, were you expecting less?" as some youth in the survey did. " Do they rejoice at finally achieving 'racelessness'? Or do they run in the opposite direction from this person that is seeking permission to denude them of one of their most obvious and defining features?

As part of building social capital, it becomes necessary to re-think social values through the eyes of those who don't necessarily share them. This is not to say that these values are inferior or faulty. What it does say is that diversity runs in different directions in society. Black youth are not just black, they are individuals. Like other youth, they are youth trying to negotiate their way in society. Take the phenomenon of 'bender parties' for instance. In one focus group the youth unanimously scoff at the notion, mostly because in black culture their parents would, to use their expression, "kill them" if they were "crazy" enough to bring friends in to wreck their home. Yet, notes one high school graduate in another group:

"Some black kids do go to bender parties... There are a few that do it but the difference goes back to (whether you come from) outside of Oakville, coming in like immigrants. I myself come from Jamaica (where) I lived for 12 years of my life. I have a completely different perspective on life, I'm more of a focused person and I find that I didn't really identify well with everyone else as far as what my morals and my standards are because from my background (and because of) my lower socio-economic background. I am more motivated to do things and more focused on school and my goals and things like that. I didn't relate very well with some of the kids.

"There are those (black youth) who are born here and who lived and grew up in Oakville, who feel comfortable. (They) don't feel different. I think the problem is mostly for those who are coming from outside of Oakville, having a different social upbringing and then coming into this situation. Then you don't know what to do, how to relate. Often times when I'd hang out with my cousin "(I'd) ask, 'Am I the only one who's feeling this way? I always felt left out on some form or level. I didn't identify with what they identified with.... Not all black

youth feel left out. There are those who don't. I do have white friends that do hang out with them and do have some of them who share the same kind of views as I do, but still we are different because they have not shared the same experiences that I have had so they aren't able to identify.

"...Cultural and political values play a very important part in terms of how you negotiate. You can be a kid in Oakville and black and your values may be just like anyone else here, or you can come from a family in Oakville [and] it does not matter. Maybe you have a strong social justice leaning." (Nikita)

In his focus group with the Advisory Committee Dr. Carl James elaborated on the young woman's observation.

"Blackness is not just blackness, nor is whiteness just whiteness, it's understood in relation to the parents' history. It's understood in relation to their white group experiences. In other words there are some that are going to go bender parties so therefore there are those that are not going to the bender parties. Context is important.

"Basically what you're saying is that it's an upbringing thing [and it] all comes out in the wash. Identity is a path that can be negotiated. (For example), how do blacks understand values such as social justice? White social justice is shared by the white youth. He or she comes to understand social justice differently. (It's the) same values as social justice, but they are coming from different perspectives given their respective locations in society."

In other words, those who work with black youth in Oakville and Halton need to bear in mind that these youth are negotiating their place in society at different levels and in so doing are defying any attempt to neatly package themselves in a box labeled 'Black'.

SECTION 3

Creating Community

- **A Framework**
- **Recommendations**

Chapter 14 – Formatting At The Source: A Framework for a Socially Inclusive Community

Creating a social framework that encourages a greater sense of community ownership among black youth is not a simple matter. First, there is the question of Why? Why this attention to racial diversity? Why single out individual groups for attention? Why not let nature take its course?

Over the years many reasons have been given for focusing on the needs of individual groups in diverse environments. It's morally the right thing to do; it addresses social inequity; it improves race relations; it pushes organizations to reflect the make-up of their communities; it addresses past wrongs. These reasons are true and they are powerful. But as frameworks for a diverse society they fall short amidst perception that they fail to close the loop creates continuum with the rest of society. Even if this is not the intent of those who propose these interventions, these 'separatist' solutions become lightning rods for controversy and wrangling about unfairness, unearned benefits, tokenism and reverse discrimination.

We propose a new framework for Oakville and Halton. And we use the term *formatting at the source* to describe it. In the old days computer users would have to reformat their brand new floppy disks before the disks would be able to store data. Many a user recalls the panic of trying to remember the formula for reformatting the disks – individually – every time they pulled out a new one. Finally, (magically it seemed!), disks began to arrive at the stores formatted and ready for use. The process obviously took place at the source and on a very large scale because now all users – computer whizzes and duds alike – pop their disks in without a second thought about reformatting. It makes so much sense that the disks come formatted. Why format them one way, only to have every one undo or reformat whatever is there in order to use them?

We recommend that Oakville and Halton go back to where the definition of who they are and how they see themselves is being formatted, put in a new set of codes, which in turn will generate definitions in which all members of society can share. In other words, we need to format the conditions for a healthy community at the source, not as a remedial measure. Formatting at the source takes time, creativity, energy and resources. Disk manufacturers must have had to reconfigure several aspects of their operations in order to create a situation where all disks came out ready for use. The payoff, however, was the benefit, as consumers became more comfortable using floppies, minus the hassle of reformatting. The investment paid off for everyone.

A Healthy Population

Health Canada has adopted population health as a strategic priority in its programming. To help define and make the concept operational, Health Canada is currently funding an initiative being championed in five Ontario regions by the Social Planning Network of Ontario

(SPNO). In the Central West region (Thomas-Elgin/Brant County/Waterloo) the discussion around population health is focusing on geographic and social isolation among seniors and youth. In Kingston the focus is on the lack of safe, affordable housing for marginalized populations, such as the homeless, while in Thunder Bay the health priority is 16-17 year-olds who fall between the mandate of the Children's Aid Society and Ontario Works.

The Sudbury project sets out to create a more inclusive city for children, while the GTA is seeking new tools to serve immigrant populations. Halton-Peel too has identified visible minority and immigrant populations as its focus – no surprise given the dramatic demographic shifts over the past ten years – and is setting out to equip social agencies and institutions to offer culturally sensitive service. Halton Social Planning Council and Peel Social Planning Council are spearheading the initiative in this area.

Achieving population health requires social and economic inclusion of a broad cross section of society. The concept, which originated in Europe, proposes that a healthy community:

- Enjoys high levels of participation by all citizens in planning and decision-making on issues that affect their health and wellbeing
- Has strong partnerships and collaboration across sectors in pursuit of common goals
- Boasts policies that promote inclusion, rather than exclusion

In other words, a healthy community is one that enjoys buy-in from a cross-section of its population, evidenced in levels of civic participation by members of society. People participate in civic efforts when they have opportunity and capacity; when they have a sense of belonging and attachment to the community.

Giving Back in Our Own way

Civic participation is the foundation of a community's social capital. Every community, including Oakville, yearns for social capital. It is the quality that makes Halton 'A World Class Place to Be', to use our regional motto. People do not move to Halton or to Oakville JUST because they want to buy a larger home. As a matter of fact, for many, moving to Oakville offers decidedly less real estate and in some cases higher taxes than they would get elsewhere. A community's social capital springs from the willingness of its people to work toward the betterment of the community even in the absence of personal gain; to maintain the social contract, whether it be by-law enforcement, public decency and law and order; or voting, participating in soccer teams and volunteering. It's what propels one couple to match every \$1,000 United Way donation up to \$150,000 and another man to give his first \$1,000 donation as a result.

But social capital is also built by people who could not give anywhere near \$1,000 in United Way donations but who have the same desire to "give back" in any way they can. It is built when people help to clean Sixteen Mile Creek on Earth Day, when they play their first

foosball tournament when they would really prefer to be playing dominoes, when they agree to share their family's African ancestry at a community cultural event. A community's social capital is enriched when people become 'participants' in society, rather than just 'members'; when a sense of trust and mutual obligation governs their relationships; when passive participation becomes active. Social capital becomes depleted when people pursue community activities, but only for their own benefit; when they enjoy a 'free ride', deriving the benefits of the community without generating benefit for others; when they form sub-groups among 'their own' without bridges to the general population, increasing the likelihood of conflict.

A Single Social Fabric

Community health rests on taking note of those who are being left out of the community building process. We acknowledge the role that their individual qualities – such as race, age, gender, economic status, sexual orientation – have on their participation levels. But, equally important, we check at the source to make sure that our community building process is inclusive, period. We define value in such a way that different types of contribution find their place. We make sure that public space is accessible to all. We provide ample opportunity for social connections that combat feelings of isolation. We not only give people a voice in the decisions that affect their daily lives, we do what we need to do to encourage them to use that voice.

When we look at our community this way we do not just see people as products of individual characteristics such as their race or age. We do not leave it up to them to try and re-format themselves into an existing definition of the community. We see them as part of the social fabric. Any tear in the fabric leaves the society itself exposed, often in areas where it is most vulnerable. So we format diverse characteristics into the very essence of the community: at the source.

An obvious objection some may have to this idea of course is that we are trying to create a bland state of homogeneity. What's worse, since majority rules, they fear that this homogeneity will exclude any visible signs of those who are not in the majority. This is the challenge that faces communities such as Oakville as they set out to become more socially and economically inclusive. Although community health is measured through factors such as income and social status, working conditions and physical environments, we do not have the option of redistributing wealth, property or opportunity (if by this we mean shifting it from those who 'qualify' into the hands of those who don't). So how do we balance between homogeneity and using artificial means to put people in places just because they happen to represent or be a member of a particular group?

Relative to black youth in Oakville, there are five keys:

1. Recognize Uniqueness of the 905 Region

The first step is to recognize the uniqueness of being a regional town on the outskirts of a metropolis, in the case of Oakville, a town in the 905 region. Generally speaking, communities surrounding the GTA fall into two categories: new and evolving. New communities – classic ‘bedroom communities’ – are literally being created out of virgin territory, previously farmland or open spaces. There is no history, inhabitants or social values to take into account as newcomers take advantage of affordable or upgraded housing that is often their reason for moving there. The challenge facing new communities is to build *social capital* from the ground up, creating opportunity for all citizens to participate in the process.

Communities like Oakville are evolving from established ways of defining themselves—and being defined by others – into a place where these definitions are being challenged by the reality of their changing demographic composition. For those who move into these communities there *is* a history of which they are not a part. There *are* inhabitants with established ways of viewing themselves and their community, that likely do not include the uniqueness that they bring as newcomers. There *are* existing social values that the newcomers may or may not share. The challenge facing evolving communities such as Oakville, is in how to broaden the way they define themselves in light of demographic realities, without losing pieces of their social fabric that they consider to be important. In short, in how to *reformat* themselves.

2. Recognize the Uniqueness of Being Black in the 905 Region

New or evolving, communities are in a state of constant change. What used to be a collection of houses in a former cornfield becomes community as people ‘set down roots’, develop loyalties and create networks among themselves – albeit on evenings and weekends after their jobs in the big city. Thanks to ‘location, location, location’ (not to mention lower taxes), some of these communities eventually attract the kind of infrastructure that allows them to be at least partially self-sufficient. Some of their citizens – particularly the young – may still yearn for the bright lights of the city after hours and may even relocate there. They do this, however, with the knowledge that they have a home base that they are consciously choosing to embrace or forsake.

On the whole, black youth in Oakville are deciding whether the Town is indeed *their* home base or their *parent’s* home base. There are those who argue that the Town is not their home base. It is the place where they are receiving a good education in a beautiful, relatively crime-free setting. This is not good news for community planners responsible for guiding and overseeing the evolution of Oakville.

The first problem comes from failing to put race in its proper perspective. In Toronto, a person who does not feel part of their community – say the Danforth, Bloor West Village or Parkdale – can move to another part of the city and still retain the identity of being a Torontonian. In a town like Oakville, there is not much room to move without having to adopt a completely new identity, say that of Burlington, Mississauga – or Toronto. For those

who remain within Oakville's borders, the second challenge is related to the first: as the community evolves, they must choose whether to be participants or just remain members. Unlike Toronto, there is little opportunity to opt out without feeling (or being) left out. Everything is up close and personal.

For black youth this presents a double challenge. Like others their age, they want to be 'just kids'. They want to share fun times with friends regardless of background. They want to 'hang out', or, in the lingo of another era, 'let their hair down'. They live in a community that is well defined, whose borders are visible and palpable, as a drive along the Lakeshore from Toronto to Burlington will attest. Whether they like it or not this *is* their community and if they ever forget, the bemused look in people's eyes when they say they live in Oakville will serve as a pointed reminder. "So you live in Oakville, eh? Guess you are the guys with the big bucks....". It is the flip side of "You live in Jane Finch/Regent Park/Mornelle Court? You guys are criminals....". One feels just as painted – or tainted.

But a young black person living in Oakville is not just another 'Oakvillian' of a darker hue. She may be young, but she is also black. And the meaning of her blackness is defined by who she is seen to be relative to blacks living in other communities; by parents who send her mixed messages about fitting in while remaining distinct; by media who project images of her that are seen to reflect her identity, rather than the proclivities of those on screen. The meaning of her blackness is shaped by the *absence* of her reflection in her surroundings, by the assumptions with which her fellow citizens greet her – and by the lure of seeing herself reflected in the light of the big city. To her, blacks in Toronto can complain of being left out, but they do have black municipal politicians, community leaders and media. They have strength in numbers so that when they wear their headbands or bandanas on to a subway train they have some protection from the stares of those unfamiliar. They have the option of being Uptown (still referred to in university circles as *bourgeois* or *chi-chi-poo-poo*), Ghetto, 'Yard Style', Home Girl, Hip Hop or Gangsta, often within the same 24-hour span, depending on the occasion they have to attend. Safe in the bosom of the familiar, the frozen stares of others melt away—at least for the time being.

3. Acknowledge the Reality of Race-Based Experiences

In a small community, it is not as easy to evade the stares of those unfamiliar, nor is it possible to avoid the tug of community building. These communities sometimes have their own issues relative to Toronto and community building becomes an inverted force – "whatever you do don't mistake us for *them*". Black youth may not be so sure that they want to completely sever psychological ties with those east of the border. Even if they don't visit often, they know that Toronto is the touchstone for important parts of their identity – if not in their minds in the minds of those who interact with them. When it comes to how black youth think others view them, the Oakville-Toronto border is porous. We are not talking here about the existence of black ghettos in Oakville. Stephen Carter describes an exchange he had with a black fellow-student at Yale Law School. He was struggling with his friend's assertion that as a

black person in America, he was disadvantaged. His friend assured him that racism is systemic and as a result hinders blacks.

Carter pondered this assertion for days. He alternated between his own life of privilege (both his parents are university educated professionals who lived well in an integrated community) and that of “black people stricken with the most abject circumstances, genuine victims of societal neglect, people who struggle through lives that a middle-class kid like me can scarcely imagine”. He mulled over several very distinct, blatant acts of racism he had encountered over the years. Carter concluded that his race-based experiences were “relatively minor in the universe of racist transgressions”.

“I have never been denied a promotion, job or food. I have never been beaten within an inch of my life. I have never been arrested for something I didn’t do, or treated with contempt by a system that refuses to believe. I have never gazed out at a bleak and uncaring world, certain that there is no place for me in it. I have never felt overwhelmed by hopelessness or hostility or despair that I have turned to drugs or crime...”

Oakville and Halton have been spared such a “universe of racist transgressions”. Carter has too, as a successful professor of law at one of the world’s most prestigious universities. As he said, he has been “marked” by racism, but has not been “hindered” by it²³. It is the kind of analysis that well-meaning parents in Oakville might share with their children as we urge them to look to the Stephen Carters of their universe as beacons of professional success.

There is, however, a small fly in the ointment, one that as a society, we can choose to ignore or to confront. It lies in the distinction between feeling ‘marked’ and feeling ‘hindered’. And it is entirely personal. When one is visibly different in an environment, anything one does – positive or negative – becomes a reflection of who they are visibly. So we hear of the first *black* so and so to do such and such. And we “gush”. Again quoting from Carter’s experiences in academia: *“That gushing is part of the peculiar relationship between black intellectuals and the white ones who seem to loathe to criticize us for fear of being branded racists—which is itself a mark of racism of a sort.”*

Squeaky Wheels

When one participates fully in community, even by doing the things everyone else does without comment – keeping the lawn at regulation height, playing with the kids outside, not creating a ruckus at night – one is bestowed with the ultimate compliment. “You are so different!” (I know of which I speak. It happened to my husband when a neighbour observed him playing outside with our children when they were younger. I had to bite my tongue to stop from asking “Different from what? From whom?”) I am reminded of a conversation I was having with a friend, a successful black mother of two bright, beautiful teenage daughters.

²³ Op. cit., page 77

She had attended an event along with groups of teenagers of different races from outside Oakville. From her account, the teens were for the most part well behaved, except for a small clutch of black girls who kept laughing and talking loudly through the presentation. My friend's annoyance sprang from two sources: people who disturb presentations with their chatter are rude and inconsiderate. To make matters worse, however, these girls were *black*. She fretted that when people saw the girls' behavior they would be thinking, 'Look at the way *black* kids behave during presentations'. So much for the 95% of well-behaved black kids! (Remember the father in Section 2 who regarded his sons as "ambassadors"?)

But my friend's analysis *was* true. After all, the squeaky wheel gets our attention over the others. It is the child that 'acts up' that grabs our focus. The attention may be negative. But we give it. And the first thing we see when we turn around in annoyance is what hits us visibly. We may not think in terms of visibility at first. But unless the person is translucent, we do see it. And we do react to it – albeit to make a conscious choice *not* to use race as a filter. Our instinct [and this goes both ways racially] is to deny the race-based filters through which we view our world. After all, who wants to be sent to diversity training remedial class! As Carter dryly observes, however: "*That there is present day racism, overt and covert, might almost go without saying, except that so many people keep insisting that there isn't any.*" [For the record, Carter is vehemently opposed to affirmative action, reminding us not to "too readily assume that contemporary discrimination explains all...observed differences.." between social outcomes for blacks and others.]

4. Recognize the 'Burden of the Race' that Black Youth Bear

Black parents and community-minded black youth set out then to ensure that when their visibility is noted, it leaves a positive impression. It's a bittersweet onus. "*I would like white people to see where we are coming from (and) what we are about to promote better understanding of (who we are) and what we enjoy doing, to show them that all black people aren't bad*", says focus group participant 'Bob'. But 'Bob', you are only sixteen! You should be out there enjoying what your white [and sometimes other visible minority] friends take for granted. According to social pundits like G.H. Erikson, you should be taking advantage of society's *lenient control* that allows you to make some errors, without feeling like you are bearing the burden of an entire race. You should be staking your claim to *extended rights* that allow you to learn by your mistakes. If you act like a goof during a theatre performance, you should feel the piercing stares of annoyed adults without feeling yourself slip into the *social pocket* of 'the way they are'.

Will 'proving oneself' help build community? The first challenge is to come up with a definition of what the community views as good, valuable and fit for enjoyment of all. Then we must do away with the notion that these virtues are racially defined. This means recognizing that in some cases 'good, valuable and fit for enjoyment of all' looks the same on everyone, regardless of race. This is when the worship service has no distinctive 'Allelujahs' as often parodied in black churches on TV. It's when the quiet wine and cheese party on the side

of the fence owned by white neighbors is happening simultaneously with the quiet gathering of friends on the black side of the fence. It's when black residents are as irate as their white neighbors are over the prospect of a homeless shelter in their neighborhood threatening their real estate values. It's when the ambitious black father wants his son to grasp the brass ring as much as his white counterpart does. This is why he is 'pestering' the child's teacher, not because he is seeking special favors because of his race.

But building – or *reformatting* – community at the source also means being open to the reality that diversity looks different on people. So what is a church to do when its black members keep 'going across the border' for youth services and Sunday evening worship? What to do with those who express themselves, well, *differently*? There are three things such an institution can do. It can ignore the drain (the flip side to over-focussing on theatre chatterboxes) and continue with things as they have always been; it can host 'multicultural Sundays' or it can reformat its worship style to more realistically reflect its demographic make-up.

As institutions struggle with what reformatting means to them, they inevitably face the question: Whose reality are we incorporating into the reformatted definition of ourselves? Who defines the black members'/clients'/students' reality? According to Stephen Carter:

"The idea that only a person of color can truly empathize with the "Third World communities" makes a villain, and perhaps an impossibility as well, of anyone who troubles to study a culture well enough to understand it and then purports to tell the culture's story... A white person, in other words cannot possibly understand what it is like to be non-white."

Carter argues that society makes distinctions between "best" and "best black" and that simply pushing for more inclusion is not the answer:

"Even our sensible but sometimes overzealous insistence that (society) respect the achievement of black culture might reinforce the depressing dichotomy: if we insist, as often we must, that others appreciate "our" music and "our" literature, we should not be surprised if those others come to think of the best of our music and the best of our literature as distinct from the best music and the best literature."

If, according to the youth in the focus groups, blackness includes the sum total of experiences, culture, psyche and socialization, then the answer to Carter is "No, a white person cannot fully empathize with the way the world looks through the eyes of a black person." Maria puts it this way:

"You don't get this by tanning in the sun all day long... My experiences don't equal the way you present yourself to other people, so shut up! Being black is not physical. It's something we all share together...it's mental. That's why we need a community. People are looking at us

from the outside rather than looking at us individually from the inside. (We are) different people with different goals and different outlooks."

5. Create Room for Personal Growth as part of Community Growth

In the eyes of youth such as Janiece therefore, reformatting community may mean holding events that are different than the norm, but that are billed as simply another aspect of life in the community. So a Caribbean Association gala, steel pans wafting as sweetly through the air as does Bach, becomes a community event. Carousel is promoted in the same way as *A Midsummer Nights Dream* in Coronation Park. Storybooks available to children in schools are as likely to feature Anansi as they are Sly Fox. The very normalcy and absence of exoticism protects the community from Carter's observation that "society has treated white as normal and color as an aberration that must be explained or justified or apologized for."

Janiece bristles at peers who accuse blacks and 'ethnics' of segregating themselves by sitting at the 'colored table' or holding multicultural club meetings.

"They're like, 'You guys don't want white people to come'. We're like 'this is free for everybody to come. You could come to our shows or whatever because basically we...and every culture in our school...just want to educate people on how ...we live...' They're like no, we feel excluded...They feel threatened if they see more than two black people together...They feel intimidated and come up with all kinds of excuses trying to blame us."

Still, youth see some form of 'segregated' activity as a means to community building. As one youth remarks: "*People complain, 'Why BET (Black Entertainment Television)? Why not WET?...WET is every channel – ABC, BBC.'*" Many youth yearn for a space where, in the words of Tamia, they can interact with each other and where they can "express and share...views and experiences in an environment where we won't be judged by anybody". "*We don't have our own black community," says one youth. And for those who see this as negative, "I'd say to them, you wouldn't understand", says Maria. "You are the majority and you don't understand that we need that strength from each other."*

Nikita explains. The Town of Oakville, she says, "*is richer when people know who they are.*" Interestingly, some youth felt that these events should not necessarily bar the door to anyone who is not black. Rather, at a minimum the consensus seems to be that the activities—from the type of music played to the topic of discussion—need to spring from the youth' experience as blacks, with others being present to enjoy and respect, rather than challenge or attempt to dilute.

In the words of Nikita:

"When black youth are in identity crisis they don't know who they are, how they are supposed to act. People need to know their background and their culture. Other people have

(their own events)... Italians and Portuguese, they get together... You are not segregating...but you need to know where you are coming from in order to know where you are going. You have to enrich yourself with your history and not be ashamed of who you are. (There's a) problem (when) people start wishing they were someone else. But if they knew that it was OK to be themselves, you'd have stronger people (who become) more productive youth, rather than thinking that if (they are) black then (they) have to be criminals, or a thugs, or wear the hip hop gear and go 'Yo, yo, whassup!'

Adding to each other's sentences Maria and Nikita suggest: *"We need a place where we can see different types of blacks...If you have people who are confident in themselves there wouldn't be so much area for them to stray away...People experiment with different groups... High school is hard enough without having racial tension...It's hard enough to find out who you are as a person, much less what race (you belong to). We are different and our differences are our strengths... We have to help ourselves first...realize who we are as a people...feel strong in who we are. If we don't accept ourselves we can't expect (others) to accept us.*

"Doing this would relieve racial tension. People would be like... 'I'm like this and that's Ok.' Everyone would be more comfortable with themselves and (be able to) come together (with others) nicely," Maria concludes. They both feel that black-focused events demonstrate who blacks are and are more effective in communicating that they are not a threat.

Community-based solutions to this problem are unsurprising: reflect the black population in local events such as Canada Day celebrations, Midnight Madness and the Waterfront Festival. The rationale, however, is poignant: *"Its harder to get along with the majority when the majority won't even accept that we are part of the community",* says Maria, Nikita adding, *"Racism equals ignorance. If you don't know, you have to judge by what one person does."* Opinions of the current line-up at these activities range from irrelevant to blacks, to unreflective of the true Oakville community. . *"It's like...history class, (where) everything we read about is what happened to whites...Scottish, Irish, British...It's so repetitive. Get something new!"* (Jamal)

According to another youth:

"By segregating ourselves we'd be giving in to racism...(and) we won't be heard. We need to go out and mix in...make them realize that we are here."

Staying to Build Oakville

The question of whether the youth are prepared to put their hands where their mouths are at in helping to make Oakville a place where everyone feels ownership drew mixed response in the focus groups. On the one hand there were youth like Bob who felt that they should take an active role, because if blacks keep yearning for other communities such as Mississauga or Toronto, Oakville will remain unchanged.

In the words of another youth:

"I don't want to leave because I was born here and this is the only place I know...If I leave I won't make any difference. I want to try and change something. If everyone leaves its going to be the same cycle over and over...I don't want to end up like those businesses that just hire their own families. Maybe I'll try to get my own business and hire people with similar value, regardless of race.

Others, particularly the older youth, have already left Oakville.

Somewhere in between are youth like Danger and Tamia who may not be happy with cultural stereotyping and other challenges they face living here, but who acknowledge that Oakville is a good place to live. When Tamia left Toronto for Oakville, she vowed she would leave as soon as she grew up. Now she won't because of opportunities she sees here in education and other areas. "Anyone can succeed (in Oakville) no matter what color you are and I feel I can do a lot better here", she says.

The largest groups of youth are at least open to opportunities to contribute to helping re-define the Town's landscape in reflection of its citizenry.

"It's not that you'd want to leave Oakville and move somewhere else, it's more like you want to improve Oakville to be more fitting or more entertaining then you'd feel more comfortable staying here instead of leaving to go somewhere else to find entertainment or something else like that.

For Mary "change starts with leadership. If you look at Oakville there is no youth leadership. There's no interaction," Other youth suggest that there be a 'forum of multicultural youth adults' – multicultural meaning all youth.

Chapter 15 - Recommendations

The focus groups have an underlying theme of black youth wanting to be assured by their environment that they are respected, welcome, worthy and free to define themselves in their own unique way. Their experiences, both within and outside of Oakville, are leading them to question the extent to which what they bring to the social fabric of their community is valued. As such, those charged with planning for them will have to reach out beyond the norm to bring them into 'community space'. It is clear too, however, that black youth do not see themselves as victims helplessly waiting to be rescued. They do ask for the tools with which to make the decision around the type and level of their involvement.

Recommendations on how institutions can become more sensitive to the diversity of their service base usually have as their foundation the need for **training, changes in recruitment strategy, funding, community outreach and policy changes**. These recommendations are part of a long-term solution. They achieve their strongest impact, however, only when a *cross-section* of the institution's target audience makes input *at the source* into how the initiatives are designed and implemented. The biggest mistake an organization will make in engaging black youth is to (a) ask them to rubber stamp planned programs into which they had no input (b) base the program on popular notions of who black youth are and what they need, without checking (c) ask their input without intention of using it or (d) fail to take into account the diversity among the black youth population.

Institutions need to go beneath the surface of some of even the most popular solutions to make sure that they accomplish their intended aim. For example, it is well accepted that having more black police officers will make policing more sensitive to blacks or having more black teachers will raise the success rate of black students. This assumption, however, has to be measured against the doubts of those who wonder if membership in a culture—be it teaching, policing or religious – does not by definition require one to share the values of that culture – positive or negative. If representation per se is by definition the solution, will the system not simply replicate itself in a different color?

The notion of representation is a troublesome one. What it does point to, however, is the need to resist easy, superficial solutions and to work closely with youth to find the key to encouraging their participation in the environments in which they find themselves. For this reason the recommendations in this section focus less on long To-Do lists – many reports, including by the institutions themselves already have these – and more on encouraging those responsible for the welfare of black youth to create space for their voices at *the source*. This way they are part of defining the system itself and are not just relegated to the role of advocates who can be selectively listened to or ignored. Sincere and innovative outreach is key to reaching black youth who have become convinced that no one wants to hear from them.

Finally, bringing black youth in at ground level alongside other youth provides opportunity for the unique position of black youth relative to white and other visible minority youth to be

recognized. Although the study did not explore black youth relationship with youth from other visible minority groups, it is very clear from the anecdotal references during the interviews that there is a sense that society considers other minorities more palatable in their behavior and in their demand for systemic change. Some black youth feel that they fall on the flip side of the stereotypes that cast Asian and South Asian youth as overachieving Math, Science and Computer techies. Against such a backdrop black youth feel they have little chance of making their own contribution to that which is valued, admired and respected by society.

Halton Region/ Town of Oakville – A Space of their Own

Black youth need physical, as well as psychological space where they can meet as a group. They need this to re-affirm themselves; to share and learn from common experiences; to strategize around how best to fulfill personal and community goals; to collectively determine their place in society; to celebrate what they value individually and as a group. The youth made clear that this would be a place of “rap sessions”, not “bitch sessions”.

The function of the space would not be unlike that of similar spaces that benefit Sikh, Croatian, Portuguese or Greek youth communities. This is not a space of segregation, although the rules of participation will emerge only as the idea is further discussed among them as a group. In the focus groups rules of entry ranged from “Do not enter”, to “All are welcome, but we set the agenda”, “We share this with everyone as a way of creating better understanding” and “We will come out to you after we have sorted ourselves out in here”.

Black Youth – Take Responsibility

Black youth themselves play a crucial role in having their realities become part of the format of Oakville. Both the youth and the parents acknowledged this repeatedly during the interviews:

- “Black youth need to set their own standards. Role models are needed because youth are going against incredible odds”, *Youth*
- “Choose whether to believe the lie about who you are or the truth of who your are”, *Parent*
- “Talk among yourselves about solutions, rather than rehash the problems”, *Parent*
- “Don’t talk about the rhetoric of ‘The Man’. Empower yourselves”. *Parent*.

Some youth expressed interest in providing leadership in initiatives to close the loop between black youth and the community. The strongest interest was in empowering other blacks, particularly those younger, to take their place in society, while others focused on creating ‘bridging’ opportunities between blacks and others. A minority showed interest in joining advisory bodies. Two strong recommendations emerged from the focus groups and interviews. The first is that youth need to ‘put their money where their mouths are’ and take the initiative to explore community initiatives, including those geared to blacks. The second is that

black youth need to have a higher level of commitment to sustaining those initiatives through volunteer work.

Boards, Councils, Advisory Panels – Infiltrate

Black youth absence from these bodies does not reflect shortage of governance or advisory talent. It is more a reflection of failure on the part of these groups to deliberately seek out black youth membership. Because of the cultural context in which we operate, black youth are likely to conclude that they are not welcome in influential circles, particularly when there is no visible diversity in these bodies. As a result advisory bodies not only lose their contribution, they continue to perpetuate the impression that they do not welcome diversity.

Boards, councils and advisory panels need to take deliberate steps to broaden the pool from which they select leaders, to ensure that it includes a choice of talented young blacks.

Black Parents – It Takes A Village

Create opportunity for black parents to share common challenges of raising children in a predominantly white society. These opportunities must be enlightening, respectful of cultural values and sensitive to the diversity among parents, whether of ancestry or of socioeconomic status. The opportunities do not have to be ongoing—such as requirement to join a club—but should speak to the unique need to juggle the impact of being visibly different, while striving for equal partnership. Activities would need to be of a high relevance to black families, with meaningful input from Halton-based black parents.

Media – Keep it Real

Media may not find black youth stories through the usual channels. They may need to deliberately create linkages and contacts; learn what is important to them; see their take on the usual and view them as a normal part of the Oakville/Halton landscape. This means that a story about high achieving students should include a black youth somewhere who is scoring in the 90s. An article on youth pet lovers rings far more complete when the reader learns, albeit through pictures, that pet lovers come in different races. Black youth do not just want to be featured when the piece is on The Rise of Hip-Hop, or on Gang Warfare. Above all, recognize the power of what the reader/viewer reads or sees on the same level as what they don't see or read. Media have the power to rectify the devastating stereotypes that have become household.

The youth say it best. *“Keep it real. Look at our lives as the way it is instead of just saying we are like Puff Daddy or we live in big mansion... We're just trying to live life the way we want... If people can see that they'll see the real us”.* (James).

Halton media should ensure that they have black youth on their community editorial or advisory boards.

Institutions – Educate to Change Attitudes

Organize Discussion Circles around key issues facing the organization, beginning with how to create inclusiveness at all levels. Discussion Circles are not town hall meetings, although they work on the same premise. They follow a format that allows for learning, sharing and increased understanding of different perspectives on the same issue.

Augment specialized training that requires ‘pulling people off the beat’ into a classroom setting, with reformatting of generic training – at the source. A training workshop on dealing with shy children will benefit from a perspective that helps participants understand racial or cultural factors that could contribute to shyness. Customer service staff will benefit from understanding that their youthful clients – even the black ones, are not a monolithic block. Police officers will benefit from the understanding of how a simple action that has traditionally been done without question is now being viewed as a threat to black youth.

Training and educating staff, teachers and service providers is an investment in the social capital of the organization and in Halton/Oakville, as black youth move from feeling victimized to feeling that society wants what they have to offer. Training must be supported by appropriate policy change.

Specific to schools

- Continue working with community organizations to make available books that reflect the varied experiences of blacks
- Use storytelling to share the rich oral tradition of black cultures with the student body
- Provide exposure so that students don’t automatically link unfamiliar accents with being uneducated.
- Make information about opportunities such as Oakville Youth Council and Halton Multicultural Council more readily available
- Allow opportunity and appropriate guidance for multicultural clubs to deal with the issues that concern black youth

Police – Look at the Whole Picture

In Halton, engaging black youth *at the source* will pay dividends if the youth believe their input is truly valued. The recommended way of doing this is as follows:

Create a Youth Advisory Committee that comprises a cross-section of Oakville youth, since they share many of the same concerns around their relationship with the police. To ensure that black youth are well represented on the committee, engage them in the pre-planning stage, so that they will have equal opportunity to shape its basis and foundation. Work closely

with local black organization(s) to identify a cross-section of black youth that reflects the black community in Oakville/Halton. The existence of the committee does not stop the police from meeting individually with community leaders, to ensure that individual issues don't get lost. But the value of a Youth Advisory Committee lies in the fact that:

- i) it creates a level playing field for all youth and gives equal opportunity to influence the face of policing
- ii) it removes any perception that the police 'play favorites' among communities of youth, based on their social acceptance
- iii) it provides an ongoing forum and sounding board where the police can test youth-related strategies and understand the multiple faces of youth in the region in a holistic manner
- iv) it brings the experience of black youth into community space, enabling the community to reckon with these experiences as part of its social discourse on policing
- v) it helps the police to plan systematically, rather than racially

The committee's mandate and format must allow for addressing uniqueness and differences in experience among the youth populations among its membership.

Community Arts/ Recreation – Need for Reflection

Those who plan community-based arts or recreation events should continue working with black organizations to showcase black youth as part of the Town's artistic expressions. Although the organizers of events such as the Waterfront Festival, Canada Day events, Midnight Madness, Christmas events, parades and the Jazz Festival have worked to reflect black youth, the youth do not see themselves reflected. A new strategy may be needed. If asked, youth will not only share their preference, they will even help to make it happen. The bonus is that a cross-section of youth from the community in general will benefit or become attracted to the event, given the widespread appeal of black culture and recreation.

Social Service Agencies – Reach Out

Work with ethno-specific groups and agencies to gain a better understanding of the black youth experience. Invite black youth to sit on advisory panels; educate and train staff to appreciate the impact of racism on black youth psyche and to understand the uniqueness of their place in Oakville as opposed to large urban centers. Invite black youth in the capacity of mentors and role models to other youth – black and otherwise.

Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton – Build It, They'll Come

The major recommendation from the youth is that the CCAH facilitate creation of a black youth organization. The CCAH already has a youth wing, but there is need to revive it, in collaboration with the youth. The CCAH, should also work with any other non-Caribbean

based black groups to explore the possibility of creating opportunities for youth to gather as black youth facing common concerns.

Halton Diversity Advisory Committee – Network and Connect

HDAC can play a crucial role in bringing black youth in at the formatting stage of service delivery in Halton and Oakville. The Committee should support:

- the exploration of identity formation and civic participation among other diverse communities, using the approach
- efforts to bring black youth issues into public discourse
- efforts by the *Oakville Re-Defined* partners to lobby in support of the report's recommendations
- integration of the report's findings into its own exploration of the region's success in serving diverse communities.

Putting Youth Into The Picture

The Halton Social Planning Council carried out a study in 1998 entitled *Oakville: An Audit of A Community in Transition*. Two of the critical service gaps identified in that study were services of all kinds to Oakville youth and services and issues associated with a multicultural community.

The survey showed that people felt that Oakville youth have been left out of planning for social supports and activities. Respondents identified gaps in (i) empowering youth to identify and solve their problems (ii) programs that respect and reflect youth lifestyle and social needs, such as activities that remain open after midnight (iii) training and employment programs (iv) crisis services such as emergency shelters (v) substance-abuse programs and (vi) community activities celebrate youth as a community assets and resources.

In its 2001-2003 strategic plan, the Region of Halton has identified youth as a strategic priority, setting a goal to “work with all our partners to improve the way we meet the health and social needs of youth in Halton”. To this end the Region has hosted a major youth forum – Youth for Youth – and is spearheading an initiative to create an inventory of services, identify gaps and “enhance programs that provide opportunities for youth to strengthen their social, physical, emotional and intellectual well-being. The Region has also committed to creating a strategic plan for youth, in collaboration with services, institutions and others responsible for youth in Halton.

The questions asked and the approaches used in *Growing Up Black in Oakville* allow those responsible for the well-being of youth in the Town of Oakville to go beyond whether they are serving black youth well, to explore how the youth see themselves as recipients of these services. The study gives voice to youth as members of and participants in Oakville, providing

valuable insights as well as specific challenges to the Town and Region. The time is certainly right.

THE END

Section 4

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Designing the Project

Community Partners

It became clear that there was a range of perspectives and dimensions to *Growing Up Black in Oakville* and that they had significant implications for both the youth and the community. Three local organizations agreed to 'take ownership' of the project and its aftermath: the Canadian Caribbean Association which has operated in Halton for the past 25 years; Halton Multicultural Council, an umbrella settlement agency and Halton Social Planning Council and Volunteer Centre, specialists in social research.

Academic Advice

Professor Carl James of York University served as academic advisor to the project. Dr. James is well known for his books and studies on black youth issues. His role was to oversee project methodology and supply background resources and perspectives on the larger issue of identity, black youth and race issues in general. Dr. James held a workshop with the project's advisory committee.

Project Advisory Committee

The advisory committee was essentially the project's 'reality check'. The group played a critical role in ensuring that the relevant issues were addressed; adding perspective to the project findings; and, making sure that the research produced proposed solutions that would guide them in their own work in Oakville. The committee served as a sounding board, 'devil's advocate', early warning system and source of insight and inspiration. In its advisory capacity, the committee reviewed the report before its release but did not necessarily endorse all the findings and recommendations. The findings and views of *Oakville: A Community Re-Defined* therefore reflected those of the researcher and the community partners, not necessarily those of the advisory committee.

Project Funding

Funding for the project came from the Department of Canadian Heritage, whose interest lay in the potential for the project to contribute to Halton Region's diversity strategy. The Department also saw potential for the project methodology and framework to be applied to other minority communities in the region. The project partners provided in-kind contribution in the form of administrative support, reduced rates for workshop speakers, venues, etc.

Methodology

The basic methodology used in the project consisted of 10 focus groups of 60 youth from 13 to 24 years old; two focus groups with parents; and, research of literature related to identity formation among youth in general and ethno-cultural minority youth in particular. We also conducted a range of interviews with key individuals and organizations in Halton who plan for or serve youth and their families or who had insight, experience and interest in becoming more relevant to black youth. We obtained focus group participants through means such as announcements in (Roman Catholic) schools; referrals by members of the advisory committee, churches and community group; and by approaching youth on the streets. The youth members of the advisory were instrumental in making connections among their peers. Parents came to us through similar channels.

Project Outcomes

The project set out to produce the following:

- a. *A framework* for understanding how the identity of black youth is being impacted by living in Oakville
- b. *Information* to assist the Region of Halton and Town of Oakville encourage more active participation among black youth in civic life
- c. *Qualitative data* from interviews that will help regional and Town planners, institutions and service providers to understand the perspectives of black youth
- d. *A model* for engaging black youth and their families in building strong ties and networks in Oakville
- e. *Presentation* to regional bodies

The intention overall was to produce the kind of information that will provide as it were the 'inside scoop' on how black youth really feel about and react to efforts of those responsible for shaping the environment in which they are growing up.²⁴

²⁴ The project report and recommendations were released to the general public on May 15, 2003 at a launch event held in Oakville. It was presented to Halton Regional Council's Diversity Advisory Committee in July 2003 and to Oakville Town Council in September 2003.

Appendix 2 – Advisory Committee Terms of Reference

Purpose

The primary purpose of the Committee is to provide overall guidance to the project to ensure that research integrity and community needs and perspectives are maintained throughout all aspects.

In this regard the committee will, among other functions:

- a. help the researcher and partners to locate families for the study and facilitate contact with these families
- b. facilitate meetings with the agencies, organizations and officials with whom members have connections
- c. Guide the researcher in addressing issues that are of significance to the institutions and community sectors they represent
- d. Provide any other input needed to maintain the project's relevance and high quality.

Structure

The Committee will be comprised of a Chair (Maureen Brown) and membership from the following:

- 1) Canadian Caribbean Association (partner)
- 2) Halton Social Planning Council and Volunteer Center (partner)
- 3) Halton Multicultural Council (partner)
- 4) Halton Board of Education (Catholic): Rick MacDonald
- 5) Halton Board of Education (Public): Suzanne Muir
- 6) Halton Region
- 7) Halton Child and Adolescent Services: Liz Hopkins
- 8) Halton Police: Diane Hendry
- 9) 3 youth: Nicola Lee, Allan Robertson, Kyle Allison
- 10) 3 parents: Elizabeth Yango, Maxine Dixon, Wallace Pitt

Report Review: Colin Dart, Transitions for Youth; Jody Sanderson, Oakville Councillor Ward 4; Deana Malcolm

Frequency Of Meetings

Three meetings during the project's 1-year term, for an average of 2 hours per meeting.

Decision-Making Process

The Committee will function in an advisory capacity and will be updated every three months on the project's progress. This will take place just before each committee meeting. The project Chair and partners will receive the committee's input and the Chair will integrate input in keeping with the project's goals and objectives.

Appendix 3 – Partnership Agreement

Halton Multicultural Council and Halton Social Planning Council and Volunteer Centre have agreed to serve as partners to Maureen Brown in her project, “Identity, Culture and Community among Black Youth in Oakville, Ontario.”

As project partners our role will be as follows:

- Provide guidance in the development of aspects of the project that fall within our sphere of expertise – issues of race and culture, as well as research methodology and demographic analysis, respectively.
- Provide reference materials in our organizations’ possession and offer suggestions regarding outside materials, studies and resources needed for the literature review.
- Help in developing interview and focus group tools, analyze census data and create a framework and methodology for the focus groups (Halton Social Planning Council)
- Provide input on the larger picture of race-related issues in the region (HMC)
- Offer key community contacts and where necessary establish initial linkages between the project and relevant regional initiatives and players so as to encourage long-term adoption of project findings and recommendations.
- Assist in obtaining high-quality membership on the advisory committee.
- Promote the project and its importance to our stakeholders to encourage broad community support and advocacy on behalf of recommendations.
- Create at least 1 opportunity for joint presentation of the project report to key regional players.

As partners we attest to the value and usefulness of the anticipated project outcomes, as a critical part of creating an environment for optimal civic participation in Halton. We expect that the qualitative and quantitative findings will enhance efforts by our organizations, institutions and the regional government in planning for the racial composition of the demographic changes we expect to take place over the next 10-20 years. We believe further that the outcomes will enhance efforts in Halton to create a Regional Diversity Strategy, in anticipation of these demographic changes. We also attest to Maureen Brown’s capability in carrying out the tasks of this project.

Signed:

Joey, Edwardh, Executive Director, Halton Social Planning Council and Volunteer Centre

Signed:

Laila Eiriksson, President, Halton Multicultural Council

Signed:

Veronica Tyrrell

Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton

Appendix 4—Focus Group Participant Questionnaire

Name (First name only or pseudonym)

Age

Gender

Grade

Place of Birth

Parent's place of birth

Family income level: (\$100,000+); (\$70,000-\$99,000); (\$50,000-\$69,000) (Below \$50,000). Answer this question only if you are comfortable.

What is/are your parents' occupation (s)

What do you dream of being when you leave school?

Is there anything that could stop that dream? (1 or 2 words only)

Is your dream any different from that of your (non-black) friends? (Yes/No)

What are your extra-curricular activities?

Where do you go when you want to socialize?

Do you ever go outside of Oakville? Where? Why?

Part of Oakville in which you live:

- North-West (North of QEW/west of Trafalgar
- North-East (North of QEW/East of Trafalgar to Winston Churchill
- South –West (South of QEW/west of Trafalgar
- South East (South of QEW/East of Trafalgar

Postal Code

In which of the above areas is your school located?

Rank the following in terms of their influence in defining who you are as a person:

(1 = least important; 10 = most important)

- Religion
- Your family's income level and lifestyle
- Your gender
- Family
- Your school
- Extra-curricular activities at school
- Community volunteer activities
- Friends
- Personal characteristics (such as looks, skin, sense of style, hair)
- Your personal beliefs about life

On a scale of 1-10 how important is your race in influencing the way you define yourself in the above ratings?

- Religion
- Your family's income level and lifestyle
- Your gender
- Family
- Your school
- Extra-curricular activities at school
- Community volunteer activities
- Friends
- Personal characteristics (such as looks, skin, sense of style, hair)
- Your personal beliefs about life

Do you think that the way you define yourself would be different if you lived in another part of the GTA? (Yes/No)

Give a positive and a negative example of the above (Just the name of the place)

Give 3 positive things about growing up in Oakville. (3 words only)

Give 3 negative things about growing up in Oakville (3 words only)

As a person, do you identify with Oakville in the way you define yourself? If not, where?

Living in Oakville is your race (a) an advantage (b) a disadvantage (c) does not matter

Appendix 5 – Focus Group Participant Summary

| Category | Numbers | Percentage |
|------------------------|------------------------|------------|
| AGE | 13-23 | |
| GENDER | Males (15) | 40.5 |
| | Females (22) | 59.5 |
| | Unidentified (1) | |
| GRADE (n= 36) | 8-OAC (29) | 80.6 |
| | University/College (7) | 19.4 |
| PLACE OF BIRTH (n= 35) | Canada (18) | 51.4 |
| | Caribbean (10) | 28.6 |
| | Middle East (1) | 2.9 |
| | Africa (4) | 11.4 |
| | Europe (1) | 2.9 |
| | U.S. (1) | 2.9 |
| FAMILY INCOME (n= 16) | \$100,000+ (8) | 50 |
| | \$50-69,000 (4) | 25 |
| | Less than \$50,000 (4) | 25 |

Thirty-eight youth participants filled out questionnaires. Most were born in Canada, several in Oakville and surrounding areas. Others came from a range of countries, including Europe and the Middle East.

Although randomly selected, many of the youth clearly come from middle-class homes. Half of those who responded to the question on family income reported incomes in excess of \$100,000 per year. A quarter of the participants were in the middle range of \$50,000-\$69,000 per year, while another 25% were from families earning less than \$50,000 per year.

| Category | Numbers |
|---|---|
| PARENTS' OCCUPATION *(n= 51) 35 participants responded, 8 giving occupations of both parents. | Nursing; Social Work (14) Trades (7) Business Owner; Consultant (6) Business Management (4) Consultant/S. Employed (4) Medicine (4) Admin/Sales (4) Finance; Accounting(4) Airline Pilot (3) Teacher (1) |
| CAREER GOALS *(n= 40) *35 participants responded of which five participants listed dual aspirations reflecting talent in extreme ends of the spectrum (e.g. basketball or accounting); or, that reflected competing professional interests (e.g. Law or Medicine). | Education; Sociology (7) Law (6) Medicine; Accounting; Engineering (6) The Arts; Fashion (6) Misc. Professions (4) Journalism (3) Computers; Architecture (3) Business Owner (2) Sports (2) Trades(1) |

Although mostly financially comfortable, the youth are not from 'old money'. Their parents have clearly worked hard to afford the option of living in Oakville. The largest category of parental professions is that of Nursing and Social Work, followed by the Trades. Also interesting, is the number of parental professions such as Medicine and Accounting. As the report observes, Blacks who move to Oakville share elements, at one level or other, with the middle-class culture that defines the Town. In the questionnaire almost all the parents were born in countries outside of Canada, but, as the parent questionnaires later suggest, they have been in Canada for an average of 16 years—not including those born in Canada.

The youth's career aspirations are also telling. First, although the Trades form the second highest category of parental occupation, only one of the forty career goals given falls in this category. Most of the youth seek to pursue professions in Law, Engineering, Education and Medicine, with only two of 40 career interests lying in Sports. Even then, one of those two participants seems to hedge his bets by seeking to pursue Accounting as an option. Only two of the forty career interests involved self-employment, while a relatively high number, comparatively speaking seek to pursue the Arts, such as singing, dancing, fine arts and fashion design.

| Category | Numbers |
|---|---|
| BARRIERS TO GOALS (n=28) | Self (9) None; 'Death' (9) Money (5) Grades (2) External (2) Unsure (1) |
| GOALS DIFFERENT TO NON-BLACK FRIENDS (n=33) | Yes (18) No (15) |
| EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES *(n=48) <i>*35 participants responded, 6 participants giving more than one activity.</i> | Sports; Gym; Martial Arts (22) The Arts; Music (10) Volunteer (3) Student Activities (9) Church (4) |

The study shows a high level of motivation and aspiration among the youth, not only as reflected in their career goals, but also in their perception of their chances of achieving those goals. Whereas an almost equal number of youth felt their career goals differed from those of their non-Black friends, more than half of those who responded to the question about perceived barriers to achieving their goals felt there were none, or that they had personal control over the elements that could impede their achievement. The lowest number (4 out of 28) felt that grades or external elements could affect their success.

Sports-related activities and the Arts form the bulk of the youth's after-school involvements. As reflected in the interviews, students, on the other hand, do little volunteer work. Only 9 of the 48 activities listed were in areas such as being in school bands or on school yearbook committees.

| Category | Numbers |
|--|---|
| WHERE DO YOU SOCIALIZE? (n= 29) | Movies; mall, friends, parties (26) Church (3) “Anywhere I can be myself” “Where there are other youth my age I can relate to” |
| SOCIALIZING OUTSIDE OF OAKVILLE *(n= 40) *Some participants gave more than one location | Mississauga (19) Toronto (17) Oakville and Surrounding Areas (4) |
| WHERE DO YOU LIVE IN OAKVILLE? (n= 32) | N. QEW/West of Trafalgar...13 N. QEW/East of Trafalgar...9 S.QEW/East of Trafalgar...6 S.QEW/West of Trafalgar...4 |

Socializing

The types of activities in which Black youth engage socially seems to differ little from their peers, with movies, malls, friends and parties forming the bulk of their entertainment. Some participants responded to this question, further, with statements that hint at their dissatisfaction with Oakville’s social scene. Comments such as “Anywhere I can be myself” or “Where there are other youth my age I can relate to” were not uncommon.

The youth’s response to the question of where they socialize sheds abundant light on this dissatisfaction. Of the 40 answers to this question, 36 gave Mississauga and Toronto as their primary place for socialization. This is not surprising in light of their feelings about Oakville from social **point** of view. (See Chart #7).

Residential Patterns

In keeping with the Town’s residential patterns, the majority of Black youth interviewed live in the north-west quadrant of Oakville, followed by the north-east. These are areas that are marked by new homes and are also the areas most likely to have young families and visible minorities. (See map on page 15). The fewest number of Blacks lives in the south-east quadrant—locally dubbed Old Oakville. This area hosts many of Oakville’s most prestigious,

expensive and historic properties, which share a school catchment area with a newer residential mix of starter and mid-range homes.

| Category | Numbers |
|--|--|
| <p>TOP 3 MOST IMPORTANT DEFINING INFLUENCES ON YOUR IDENTITY *(n= 54)</p> <p>* 36 youth responded with multiple responses.</p> | <p>Personal Beliefs (21) Religion (23) Personal Characteristics (10)</p> |
| <p>LEAST IMPORTANT DEFINING INFLUENCES ON YOUR IDENTITY (n= 50)</p> <p>*36 youth gave multiple responses</p> | <p>Community/Volunteer (22) Extra-Curricular (15) Income (13)</p> |
| <p>DEFINING INFLUENCES IMPACTED BY RACE (n= 34) adds up to 34</p> | <p>Gender (13) Personal Beliefs (13) Religion (8)</p> |

Interview questions about the elements that impact the youth’s self-identity generated heated discussions during the focus groups. Personal beliefs and religion are the most influential features in how the youth define themselves, in stark contrast with the way the youth *think* that society defines them. Other important definers are their personal characteristics, such as their skin colour, body shape and hair.

The least important elements that define the way the youth see themselves are community and volunteer work, extra-curricular activities and income. In the case of volunteer work, participation levels actually match the importance they place on it as an integral part of who they are. Extra-curricular activities on the other hand does not seem to match their participation levels (see chart #3), nor does income, given that at least half of them come from homes earning over \$100,000 per year. Discussions indicate that although the youth have financial means and participate in school activities, they do not *define* themselves by their status. Rather they resort to more internal qualities to define who they are.

When it comes to the impact of race on the way they define themselves, the youth, on the other hand, see their gender as being most impacted, as in the stereotypes they feel society holds of them as young Black men and women. They describe these stereotypes in the discussions. The discussions also indicate that religious and personal beliefs are often shaped as they resort to these elements as buffers to a world that does not always understand their blackness. Some reject the exclusive use of white Christian icons, while others choose to attend church in Toronto with Black congregations. Still others craft belief systems in response to the rejection they feel in predominantly white churches.

| Category | Numbers |
|--|--|
| WHERE DO YOU IDENTIFY AS A BLACK PERSON? *(n= 34) | Oakville (11) "Not Oakville" (7) Toronto (5) Caribbean (5) U.S.(4) Africa (2) |
| IS YOUR OAKVILLE DEFINITION [AS A BLACK PERSON] DIFFERENT THAN OTHER PARTS OF THE GTA? | <p><i>"Yes, I'm more positive (and) energetic in Burlington, with more people sharing my interest."</i></p> <p><i>"Yes, in Scarborough I'd be seen (in a negative light).in Mississauga ...a more positive."</i></p> <p><i>"Yes, Jane-Finch is more negative with the police"</i></p> <p><i>"Yes, in Toronto I have more Black friends, but it's too violent."</i></p> |

When asked with what community they identify as Blacks, the majority of youth said Oakville. At first glance this seems to contradict their preference to socialize outside of Oakville. However, focus group discussions indicate that youth do take pride in the fact that they are from Oakville. Although they may leave the Town for cultural and personal enrichment as Blacks, they are aware that in other communities they are associated with the `prestige' of Oakville. They may even use it to their advantage.

One questionnaire item asks them to rank the way they are defined in Oakville against other parts of the GTA. The majority felt there was a difference, usually in relation to the negative image they feel they would have in other parts of Toronto, or to the negative relations with police. A minority said there was no difference.

| Category | Numbers |
|---|--|
| <p>POSITIVES ABOUT OAKVILLE *(n= 50)</p> <p>* 32 participants gave more than one characteristic.</p> | <p>Safety (19) Physical Surroundings (17) Lifestyle; Status (10) Schools (5) People (4)</p> |
| <p>NEGATIVES ABOUT OAKVILLE *(n= 43)</p> <p>*32 participants, some listing multiple elements</p> | <p>Lacks (cultural) entertainment, Black products; boring (13) Narrow-minded, sheltered; elitist (9) Racism (8) Lacks racial diversity (8) Racial/police profiling (5)</p> |
| <p>BEING BLACK IN OAKVILLE *(n= 32)</p> <p>* 4 participants gave Advantage/Disadvantage as a category.</p> | <p>Disadvantage (16)</p> <p>Advantage (10)</p> <p>Not matter (6)</p> |

The youth's appreciation for Oakville centers on the Town's safety compared to parts of Toronto and on its physical beauty. They bemoan the Town's lack of entertainment and shopping that reflect their tastes, but they also enjoy the lifestyle associated with the Town. The lowest scores are in their appreciation for the 'people' of Oakville. Of the top 53 negative elements of Oakville scored, 22 relate to what they see as narrow-mindedness regarding diversity, as well as to outright racism. The remaining elements concern the Town's lack of diversity in its make up. The majority of youth feel that being Black in Oakville is a disadvantage.

Appendix 6 – Parents Focus Group Questionnaire

Please take the time to fill out the following questionnaire. Do not attach your name. We will use the information as part of creating a social/economic profile of the focus groups.

Gender

Place of Birth

If you immigrated to Canada, how long have you lived (a) in Canada

How long have you lived in Oakville?

Family Income range (optional): (\$100,000+); (\$70,000-\$99,000); (\$50,000-\$69,000); (Below \$50,000)

Occupation/Profession

For church/social activities, etc. do you mostly (a) remain in Oakville or (b) go outside of Oakville. If the latter, where do you go?

Part of Oakville in which you live:

- North-west (north of QEW/West of Trafalgar)
- North East (North of QEW/East of Trafalgar)
- South-West (South of QEW/West of Trafalgar)
- South-East (South of QEW/East of Trafalgar)

Your postal code

Is your home (a) a single parent (b) dual parent?

Highest level of education achieved (a) high school (b) college (c) university (d) post grad.

Why did you move to Oakville (if you were not born here)? Use one or two words only.

Appendix 7—Parent Interviewee Profiles

| CATEGORY | NUMBERS |
|---|--|
| Gender n= 14 | M(6) F(8) |
| Country of Origin n= 14 | Africa(5) Caribbean(6) England(2) Canada (1) |
| Length of time in Oakville n= 14 | 10+ yrs.(4) 5-9 yrs(5) 1-4 yrs.(5) |
| Length of time in Canada n= 14 | 20+ yrs.(6) 5-9 yrs.(4) 10-19 yrs.(2) 1-4 yrs.(2) |
| Income n= 8 | \$100,000+ (5) \$70-\$99,000(1) \$50,000-69,000(1) Below \$50,000(1) |
| Occupation n= 14 | Computer Specialist (2) Consulting (1); Accounting (2); Banking/Finance (2); Admin (3); Communication(1); Art and Design (1); Management(1); Education (1) |
| Where socialize *n= 18 * 3 parents said both Oakville and Toronto | Oakville (10) Outside of Oakville (8) |
| Area of residence n= 14 | North-West of QEW (8) North-East of QEW (2) South-East of QEW (4) |
| Single/Dual Parent home n= 14 | Dual(13) Single(1) |
| Education n= 14 | College (7) University (6) Post-Grad (1) |
| Why moved to Oakville n= 13 | Housing (4) Work (4) Beauty/quiet (2) Education (1) Safety (1) Chance (1) |

The parents interviewed are not necessarily parents of the youth in the focus groups. In total 8 females and 6 males filled out questionnaires. All except one were born outside of Canada – mainly the Caribbean and Africa—and had been in Oakville for an average of 16 years. Ten parents lived in other parts of Canada prior to settling in Oakville.

As with the parents of the youth interviewed, the parent focus group reflects high levels of professional accomplishment and income. Of the 8 who filled out the income question, the families of five earn over \$100,000; 1 earn \$70-99,000; 1 report \$50-\$100,000 and 1 report less than \$50,000. Professions include Computer Specialist; Consulting; Banking; Accounting; Communications Education; Management) and Administration.

Seven of the 14 questionnaire respondents hold university degrees – one post-graduate – while the remaining seven are college educated.

As with the youth interviewees (Chart #4), the majority (8 of 14) parent interviewees live in the north-west quadrant of Oakville, while 2 live in the north-east. Four parents live in south-east Oakville. All except 1 parent live in dual-parent homes.

When asked where they socialize more than half (10) of the 18 responses (3 parents said both Oakville and Toronto), indicate Oakville. This is considerably higher than the youth responses to this question, as only 4 out of 40 youth responses include Oakville. On the other hand only 2 of the remaining 4 parents socialize in Mississauga, compared to almost half of the youth. The remaining six parents socialize in Toronto.

When asked why they moved to Oakville 4 of 13 parents say Housing; 4 say work opportunities; 2 say the beauty and quiet; 1 gave education and 1 safety. One parent came by chance. The benefit of living in Oakville looks different in the eyes of the youth. To them the primary attraction is the Town's safety and freedom from crime; its physical beauty; and, its lifestyle and status (Chart #7).

Appendix 8 – A Model For Engaging Black Youth And Their Families

Reaching black youth and their families in Oakville required:

- i) Extensive youth to youth networking
- ii) Flexibility and options in timing. Many families work outside of Oakville and youth tend to study outside of Oakville and or hold part time jobs.
- iii) Convincing the youth and adults that the Town/Region really want their input
- iv) Understanding the socio-economic diversity within the community and how it affects people's assessment of their lives in Oakville
- v) Understanding the cultural variations between youth of Caribbean, African and Canadian descent
- vi) Patience to recognize pain and alienation in different guises
- vii) An understanding of the discomfort involved in being 'singled out' for attention: recruitment should not be done in mixed group settings
- viii) Close working relationships with community organizations, which for some families are the first point of contact
- ix) Understanding that 'a prophet is not honored in his own country': not every one has high regard for ethno-specific organizations
- x) Appreciation of the mixed feelings that exist towards organized community activities: some families want to simply blend in
- xi) Attracting youth with activities/entertainment that a cross-section of *black* youth enjoy
- xii) Being open to learning, rather than assuming one understands the nuances of black youth culture
- xiii) Having a keen understanding of where black youth concerns intersect with those of other communities and developing strategies to address appropriately.
- xiv) Understanding the twin psychological pressure of being compared with white youth and other visible minority youth
- xv) Understanding the mixed feeling among youth towards 'BET culture'
- xvi) Recognizing that although youth identify with many aspects of their urban counterparts, living in the suburb places a on their thinking
- xvii) Acknowledging that the weight of media stereotypes transcend the Oakville border and weighs heavily on the youth
- xviii) Accepting that black youth are first and foremost youth
- xix) Recognizing that the racial factor adds a dimension to black youth's lives that their white and other visible minority counterparts do not have to contend with
- xx) Recognizing that many youth are torn between an 'Oakville culture' and black urban culture

Appendix 9 – Profile of Maureen Brown

Maureen Brown has worked in the area of diversity and inclusion for more than 20 years. For the past five years she has provided diversity-related needs assessment, policy development, strategic planning and training to not-for-profit organizations, regional governments and organizations in the broader public sector. Maureen helps organizations to assess their internal and external diversity climate; prepare anti-harassment, anti-oppression and/or inclusion policies; and, develop strategies for achieving their goal of being inclusive, harassment free and positioned to derive maximum benefits from the diversity of their employees and client groups. She then designs appropriate training and education as well as communication support to equip the organization to fulfill its goals.

Maureen is a member of the Peel-Halton Social and Economic Inclusion Initiative, which recently conducted training with senior staff and Executive of Peel human service organizations, on how to create diversity competent organizations. She is also helping Community Development Halton to plan a follow-up workshop in Halton Region. Maureen's varied background in diversity ranges from preparing research materials and providing editorial support for a book on global diversity, to serving for 10 years at the Ontario Human Rights Commission as a senior communication specialist.

Maureen has conducted several community-based research studies for organizations seeking to create inclusive work and service environments. She is the author of the federally funded report, *In Their Own Voices: African Canadians in the Greater Toronto Area Share Experiences of Police Profiling*, as well as a series of supporting fact sheets. This initiative received wide acclaim and coverage in Toronto and national media. She also wrote *Growing Up Black in Oakville—The Impact of Community on Black Youth Identity Formation and Civic Participation*, also featured in the *Toronto Star*, on CBC Metro Morning and in several other Halton and Toronto media. She has conducted research for the Ontario Women's Directorate, strategic planning and training for Halton Multicultural Council and Halton Women's Shelters and drafted materials on bias-free hiring for the United Way of Hamilton and Burlington. She is a past board member of the YWCA of Greater Toronto.

For the past two years Maureen has worked extensively with Toronto's University Health Network –comprising Toronto General, Toronto Western and Princess Margaret hospitals and Toronto Medical Labs. Maureen has held workshops with managers, senior leaders, physicians, bargaining unit staff and volunteers and has developed multi-media train-the-trainer resources for use by management, HR and diversity staff. The kits provide materials and instructions for workshops on Religion and Spirituality; Sexual Harassment; Racism; and, Communicating in a Diverse Environment. She has also held workshops with Canadian Heritage staff and managers and with companies facing human rights complaints. For two years at Centennial College she taught a course on serving diverse clientele to taxi driver/owners applying to the City of Toronto for an Ambassador's license. She was consultant to the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, where in 1999 she developed its organizational plan, with strategies for community relations, corporate sector fundraising, issues management, public education and program development.

Maureen is a trained journalist and communication specialist, skilled in handling harassment and diversity issues in an open, honest and sensitive manner. She has written manuals on HIV/AIDS as a disability; the criminal justice system; immigration; bias-free hiring; and, the *Human Rights Code*. She has also written for several community and mainstream media in Canada and abroad.

For further information:

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Halton Multicultural Council, 905-842-2486

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Maureen Brown, 905-338-7515