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Claremont McKenna College

To Integrate or to Assimilate:

*An Epistemic Analysis of Racial Segregation in Education*

submitted to

Professor Briana Toole

by

Nandini Mittal

for

Senior Thesis

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## **Abstract**

*Color has been the demarcating factor in systematically separating particularly Black and white communities, insofar as barring access to education, housing, transportation, and basic civil rights. In the fight against segregation, and a movement towards integration, the area that this we have notoriously failed in is education. This paper is an opportunity to combine the practical with the epistemological (relating to beliefs about knowledge acquisition and validity) and question the hidden or coded elements that are associated with social integration. Where do we draw the line between the social integration and assimilation? I will be exploring the concept of epistemological harms that integration may bring, especially when used as a mask for assimilating the marginalized with the dominant.*

*We have built, and continue to maintain, a system that can be metaphorized as a melting pot – assimilating the beliefs, experiences, and knowledge of the groups thrown into it to produce a fused product which we call integration. To maintain the representation of whiteness as the construct with which we lead our society, our past efforts have sacrificed a more just appetite of a tossed salad for a cohesive result. The intention of this discussion is to shed light on the realities of segregation and some of the complex, epistemic implications of integration in an America plagued by the historical conflict of a dominant white group and a marginalized Black group.*

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I want to sincerely thank my reader, Professor Briana Toole, for her unwavering support, constructive guidance, and patience throughout this process. From providing feedback on every incomplete draft or outline I submitted, to constantly inspiring new ideas and avenues for exploration, I can honestly say this would not have been possible without her. I also want to thank Professor Rima Basu, whom I took one of my first ever philosophy classes with, for being a personal mentor and a big part of the reason I chose to pursue this major. Thank you to Professor Adrienne Martin and Professor Amy Kind for the insightful courses that furthered my interest in philosophy these past four years.

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## INTRODUCTION

Students sat in a morning class at a segregated Black school in Kinson, North Carolina, and were given an assignment to identify features of an ‘ideal school’. In reflection of the list they had created, this group of teenagers quickly realized that they were simply describing their neighboring all-white school. They tried to confront the local district school board, and were barred from entering the board meeting to make their case about the blatant inequalities present among schools in the area. 720 students gathered to march in protest, and refused to return to school for a week. This occurred in November of 1951, and the school remained segregated until 1970<sup>1</sup>.

Imagine living in a neighborhood with 18 elementary schools available for enrollment of white children but needing to transport your child to one of the four severely under-resourced Black schools in an area far from your home. This was the reality for Oliver Brown in Topeka, Kansas, sparking the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. A class-action lawsuit was filed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), arguing that the quality of education accessible by Black folks was inferior to that of white students and thus violated the clause of Equal Protection in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment (The Brown Foundation). Chief Justice Earl Warren ruled that, “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal”, yet inequalities persisted for years to come (Smithsonian National Museum of American History Behring Center).

Black communities were forced to hold the socio-economic progress of their children in their own hands, fighting to build a sense of identity and cultural capital in a time of extreme

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<sup>1</sup> Case sourced from the Library of Congress Collection on School Segregation and Integration

segregation. Families owed a “Black tax” as cited by historian James Anderson, in needing to oblige by local taxes in addition to spending personal funds on uplifting and maintaining the severely under-funded Black schools that their children were forced to attend. Sonya Ramsey, in her piece on “The Troubled History of American Education after the Brown Decision” continues to explain that Black teachers earned lower salaries than their white counterparts, but were required to invest their own resources outside of school to assist students both academically and socially, sometimes complementing or replacing family-figures in students’ lives (Ramsey, Organization of American Historians).

Color has been the demarcating factor in systematically separating particularly Black and white communities, insofar as barring access to education, housing, transportation, and basic civil rights. In the fight against segregation, and a movement towards integration, the area that this we have notoriously failed in is education. We need to be suspicious of this and use it to fuel our collective efforts to acknowledge, and ideally correct, the impacts of educational segregation. The best course of action, whether that is complete integration, restricting the educational system entirely, or something we have not even conceived of yet, remains to be determined.

My personal life and upbringing as part of an international school community in Thailand has played a big role in the ways I think about integration, and the questions I have as a result. My high school was made up of expatriate students from 50+ nationalities but it took coming to college at a predominantly white institution for me to critically think about the ways in which I, and others around me, were taught to integrate with the larger community. Small things like the way I anglicize my name, the need to explain my English proficiency, and even the clothing choices I make are the result of an inherent need I feel to integrate. Thus, I hope to use this paper

as a space to research and critically reflect on the nature of social integration in the United States; more specifically, integration of a marginalized community with the majority.

This paper is an opportunity to combine the practical with the epistemological (relating to beliefs about knowledge acquisition and validity) and question the hidden or coded elements that are associated with social integration. Where do we draw the line between the social integration and assimilation? I will be exploring the concept of epistemological harms that integration may bring, especially when used as a mask for assimilating non-white folk with a white majority. By virtue of grounding this discussion in the United States, and based on the research available, this paper will be centered on the relationship between white and Black communities.

I did not have a lot of exposure to Black communities growing up, but have put myself in positions to try to learn about their history and interaction with modern society after coming to college. Three years ago, my view on integration stretched as far as the struggle that expatriate, middle-to-high income students faced when trying to assimilate to an international school culture in Southeast Asia. These struggles almost seem trivial in the face of the injustices and dangers that Black students in America face in trying to, or being forced to, integrate with a white majority. Through this paper, I hope to grapple with the implications of segregation that Black communities face, and highlight the dangers present, particularly in an educational context.



## *Thesis & Scope*

Common discussions of integration assume that it is for the betterment of both the marginal and dominant population. It is important to note that these discussions primarily come from the dominant majority, and thus fail to holistically consider the disadvantages that those in the minority face. Commonly cited socio-economic benefits of social integration include the educational opportunities that integrated schools provide, enhancement of social cohesion, access to future earning potential, and better access to healthcare. On the flip side, we must be aware of the under-discussed pitfalls of integration: the barriers students face in needing to travel between segregated neighborhoods and integrated school districts, lower levels of achievement, possibilities of unemployment and lower-paying job opportunities, among many others. I hope to problematize our stance on integration through this paper, and push us to weigh the epistemic dangers of assimilation alongside the epistemic benefits of integrated communities.

Educational integration provides us with a key example to ground this discussion in. We brought Black kids into white schools in the name of integration, without considering the lack of alignment between their respective social values. White dominant mentality did not allow for Black values to be acknowledged, let alone respected. The totalitarian nature of whiteness in most of these schools made Black students unable to assert their place and denied them a sense of belonging. As a result, Black students were not able to perform to their maximum potential due to elements such as the hidden curriculum, defined as untaught taught norms and values that students are expected to understand and interact with in a school environment.

If the goal of integrating schools was exclusively to place Black students in environments with more resources than their prior schools, technically we succeeded and we could claim a job done. This is where we must be critical of the stark difference between providing access to

resources in an attempt to assimilate populations, and an intentional effort to integrate them. Here, let me emphasize the definitions of integration and assimilation for the purposes of this paper. Integration carries the weight of acknowledging and actively eliminating racial discrimination in a community environment. Assimilation, conversely, connotes a marginalized population assuming the cultural beliefs and practices of a majority group.

Without diminishing the progress that we have achieved, I want to metaphorize our efforts of integration thus far. They have amalgamated into a ‘melting pot’ of values rather than the ‘tossed salad’ we might have hoped for. A white-centric mentality still dictates the voices we prioritize and the socio-economic decisions we make as individuals and as a nation. We sit at the most diverse point this nation has ever witnessed, and are headed in the direction of a new, and hopefully improved social order. To chart our path ahead effectively, we must critically reflect on the issues we face with the segregation of disadvantaged minority populations, namely the Black population – commonly termed ‘American Separatism’. Race sits at the forefront of these issues, and it is time that we honestly confront our progress and discomfort with these issues simultaneously. My goal with this piece is not to provide a historical analysis of inequalities that have persisted. Rather, I hope to provide broader explanations that allow us to further our understanding of racial segregation, in education specifically, and the epistemic implications at play.

Maybe we set out with the hope that integration would fail to maintain the benefits that segregation provided the dominant majority. Integration may carry a positive connotation to most, but it may not be as desirable as we had once hoped. To achieve a societal goal of correcting the immoralities that we have allowed to persist, we need to look beyond exclusively practical implications of our past decisions. Therefore, I will ground my evaluation of integrative

efforts in practical, epistemic, and existential impacts as a guiding framework. This does not provide an exhaustive conception of the topic, but my hope is that it will further a largely socio-economic discussion with under-weighted philosophical aspects that are crucial to carving an ideal path forward, if such a thing is possible at all.

In framing this discussion, I will first contextualize race as a problem of social value, relying on the explanation provided by author and philosopher Christopher Lebron in his book, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time*. I will then move to ground my approach as one of ‘non-ideal theory’, where the existing social issues and realities of our history, namely racial inequality, are used as the foundation to mark progress against. I will do so by presenting an evaluation of political philosopher Elizabeth Anderson’s discussion of the topic in *The Imperative of Integration*. This will set up the methodology from which the rest of my discussion will follow.

Chapter 2 opens with examples from a public-school study conducted by Jean Anyon in New Jersey, which I use as motivation for exploring the epistemic benefits of integration. I also emphasize the purpose of education and the existential impact of segregation on self-respect, drawing from reputed philosophers and educators, Noam Chomsky and Michele Moody-Adams, respectively. The third and final chapter of this piece discusses potential pitfalls of integration, noting the implications of ‘epistemically exploiting’ a marginalized group, as explained by Nora Berenstain. Within this chapter, I also survey Tommie Shelby and Kwame Anthony Appiah on a counterargument to integration; that of self-segregation. I end by exploring the dangers posed by echo chambers and epistemic bubbles in segregated communities; being social structures that may limit knowledge acquisition, contribution and result in misinformation, as analyzed by C Thi Nguyen in his piece, “Escape the Echo Chamber”.

In crafting the arguments of this piece, I start with the epistemic benefits of integration, then move to potential pitfalls and dangers of assimilation, then provide a counterargument in the fight to integrate and an implication for societal knowledge acquisition, before I end with concluding remarks. I sincerely hope that each section prompts interest and a further line of questioning among readers, as this is only one piece within a project that remains unresolved. I also strongly encourage readers to engage with this material beyond the scope of discussion presented in this paper.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Systemic Racism & Non-Ideal Theory*

I first want to emphasize the inherent inequality persistent in using race as a demarcating factor in one's access to society. To me, this is best understood through Christopher Lebron's explanation of race as a problem of social value. Lebron suggests, "that the fundamental move necessary to undermine racial inequality in the deepest sense is to understand it as the *problem of social value* – the fact that blacks do not occupy an equal place in the scheme of normative attention and concern upon which our society depends in the first place to justify the distribution of benefits and burdens, as well as to identify those who are deserving or appropriate recipients. In other words, we either altogether lack or otherwise possess distorted reasons for the way we treat blacks qua them being black" (Lebron 46). We have historically assigned a lower social value to Black folks, which hides and/or distorts the reasons we treat them as ontologically (relating to the nature of their being) lesser people in our society.

This manifests in individual and collective action against Black communities because racism is a systemic issue. It is not the result of our government, social structures, or cultural values in isolation, but rather an amalgamation of these factors cyclically influencing one another to create an inherently unequal system that ensures marginalized members of our society remain marginalized. We proceed to use this system to justify, whether explicitly or implicitly, our actions towards Black folks purely on the basis of their race, and diminish their ability to achieve at the same level as others in a society.

My approach to the discussion and analysis I will partake in heavily relies on a starting point grounded in non-ideal theory, where the existing social issues and realities of our history,

namely racial inequality, are used as the foundation to mark progress against. I will highlight the necessity and justification for this by evaluating the shortcomings of the converse ideal theory, wherein we start from an idealized vision and work backwards finding means for progress, as explained by political philosopher Elizabeth Anderson below.

Elizabeth Anderson opens the first chapter of her book, *The Imperative of Integration*, with an explanation of the methodology of the work she is presenting, - nonideal political theory. This is commonly considered a “derivative of ideal theory”, and she goes on to explain fundamental shortcomings of ideal theory that have resulted in her use of nonideal theory for addressing the issues of racial injustice that her book deals with. Ideal theory, at its core, starts these political philosophy discussions from a view of an ideal world, which comes in the form of a “perfectly just society” (3). Ideal theory works to perceive what integration, and justice, would look like in an ideal society; and uses this as a starting point to think about requirements for action needed to improve current circumstances.

The first shortcoming of ideal theory is its treatment of people as completely rational and just in nature, which is untrue of human beings. We can be irrational, immoral, and we have flaws in our behavior and this assumption of ideal theory ignores these entirely. As a result, to make up for these behavioral “limitations”, we must design solutions that acknowledge and analyze them to begin with. Anderson expresses this as “motivational and cognitive biases”, which can lead our institutional structure to “better conduct” as a result (4). If our goal is to correct injustices on an institutional level, I agree that we cannot assume the rationality of human beings- as it was these very flaws that created the injustices in the first place.

Another shortcoming Anderson addresses is the risk we run of leaping to conclusions about the gaps that are presented between ideal theory and reality. This can then result in the

assumption that the best solutions to these gaps are policies that directly close them. She provides the example of an ideal society being a color-blind one, which is a conservative, commonly debated response, wherein the solution would result in an end to “race-conscious policies” (4). I do acknowledge that the notion of color-blindness may yield benefits in a world where a history of color demarcation did not place members of our societies in disadvantaged positions, but we simply do not have the luxury to believe this is the case of the world we live in today.

Anderson argues the primary shortcoming of ideal theory being that it is “founded on inadequate empirical assumptions”, which do not allow for important distinctions between stereotyping, racism, and issues of racial injustice (4). Based on ideal theory’s empirical assumptions, the different pillars (civil, political, or social) that influence racial injustice issues are unrealistically thought of as a unit as opposed to separately evaluated. This leads to the final and most blatant shortcoming she discusses, that “starting from ideal theory may prevent us from recognizing injustices in our nonideal world” (5). Due to some ideal theories treating race as invisible, they would not allow for a framework to assess racially unjust societies, demonstrated by her later example of race-based residential neighborhood choices. The dignitary and expressive harms that are caused for the individual and the racial group are not acknowledged, which furthers the stigmatization of blacks and the racial injustices we were seeking to correct.

We need to build an actual understanding of the racial injustices and burdens imposed on members of unique societal structures, hypothesize relevant solutions, and then make progress by testing their implementation. I definitely agree with the need to truly capture and understand race-based injustices before implementing potential solutions and policy adaptations, especially

so that we can continue to adjust them as social circumstances inevitably develop and require revisions.

Additionally, a pro-ideal theory response may suggest that we will be limiting our scope of potential solutions if we do not establish an “ideal” target for our starting point. I think this does have some validity, as we may disregard more extreme solutions to keep our expectations realistic and grounded when adopting nonideal theory. However, I do think the benefits of doing so outweigh what we may lose in the solutions not considered, as it can keep hopes and results we seek in sight. We can also avoid the difficulties and controversies of composing a truly just target, as I think ideal theory can carry a biased view of what “justice” requires. This is demonstrated most clearly in the example of color-blindness or invisible race that can exist as per ideal theory; it suggests that race as a part of one’s identity is inherently problematic. In adopting ideal theory, we encourage a starting point that makes unrealistic assumptions about the functionality of human beings in society, and will thus ignore potential solutions that oppose this assumption.

I really liked the note Anderson ended her explanation of methodology on, she writes, “reflection on our experience can give rise to new conceptions of successful conduct” (7). I think it is extremely important to rid ourselves of the notion that bettering unjust circumstances has to constitute reaching a “best” version of our society. We should strive for justice, but we shouldn’t be fixated on an ideal end result such that we eliminate potentially less ideal, yet beneficial solutions from consideration altogether. I agree with Anderson’s methodology of starting from nonideal theory, but also think we need to be dually cautious of the negative impacts that “trying” some solutions may have on the groups and communities we are intending to better.



Grounding this discussion in non-ideal theory is essential to realistically carving a path forward and addressing an epistemic ideal of a well-integrated society. We must fully come to terms with the circumstances of today, and of the past that got us to where we are. Beyond that, we need to make it permissible for people to talk about their racism and allow for spaces of union and intersectionality to have any hope for a positive outlook. This will set the foundation and guide the method by which I approach the rest of my discussion throughout this paper, and provide a lens through which I may address potential objections from proponents of ideal theory.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Epistemic Benefits of Educational Integration*

Civil rights and social activist, Jean Anyon conducted a study of fifth-grade public school classes in varying affluent and under-served neighborhoods of northern New Jersey between 1978 and 1979. The schools differed in terms of the socioeconomic makeup of their students, where some came from highly successful corporate families, some from middle class families, and some from primarily blue-collar, working-class backgrounds. The key finding of working-class schools, attended predominately by marginalized populations, was that “knowledge was presented as fragmented facts isolated from wider bodies of meaning and from the lives and experiences of the students...work was often evaluated in terms of whether the steps were followed rather than where it was right or wrong” (Anyon 10). Anyon noted remarks from teachers and principals at these schools including, “If they learn to add and subtract, that’s a bonus. If not, don’t worry about it”, “you can’t teach these kids anything...their parents don’t care about them, and they’re not interested”, and cited that she heard the phrase “shut up” being used by teachers often (11). She concluded that this diminished students’ ability to be creative, future potential for further education/careers, and fueled a resistance to authority.

Contrast this with middle to higher-income schools, where the knowledge presented in the classroom was often related to external applications in life, and project-based learning enhancing creativity and originality were encouraged. Teachers were found praising and providing feedback to students regularly – a concept foreign to the working-class schools. Anyon posed the questions of, “What is knowledge” to students at each school, those in the working-class school did not even mention the word “think”, whereas affluent-school students articulated phrases like “figuring stuff out”, “think up ideas”, and more than half the students agreed that

knowledge can be created (18). I hope this comparison helps highlight the sheer inequality in the quality of education we have provided to students, and the distorted values with which we are allowing marginalized students to conceptualize their place in the society they are a part of.

Let us take a step back and acknowledge the values and purpose of education before proceeding. Though the value we assign to education is largely subjective and independent for each learner, I want to tie in the perspective of Avram Noam Chomsky to assist in defining this. He famously comments on the purpose of education as one linked to enlightenment, and contrasts this with conceptions of indoctrination that are conversely argued<sup>2</sup>. The enlightenment-based definition that Chomsky favors is one where the purpose of education is to spark inquiry and creativity. The goal of educators, in this context, is to help individuals determine *how* to learn and allow them to carry that into a lifelong journey of learning and applying accompanying skills and knowledge.

Conversely, education is also argued to be a tool of indoctrination; the idea that there is a framework within which youth are being placed by virtue of being education. This highlights the elements of order, discipline, and authority that are present within educational systems. Chomsky emphasizes the ‘crisis of democracy’ as one where young people are going against the grain – in reflection of educational systems and institutions failing at doing their job of indoctrination properly. At all stages of education, the two notions constantly at odds are that of using education as training for meeting certain requirements, like passing tests, or as a means for instilling creative inquiry within individuals.

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<sup>2</sup> Sourced from an interview conducted by Josh Jones, titled “Noam Chomsky Spells Out the Purpose of Education”

We stand at a point in history where we have unparalleled access to information and the knowledge to ‘search the riches of our past’, as Chomsky would say, to further our quest for understanding. This is what we use to shape our interpretation of the world, and this influences the way we interact with other individuals and our environment. My goal in this paper is not to dictate which interpretation readers should follow or what value they should assign to education, but simply to highlight the differences and cross-sections that exist within the discussion. For the purposes of my discussion here, I will align myself with Chomsky’s view of education as a positive form of enlightenment, thus motivating the following arguments for the benefits of an integrated educational experience.

Prompting creative inquiry among youth requires them to be exposed to numerous sources of information and perspectives, from which they can develop their own opinions and carve a path forward. By definition, a segregated educational community disallows this possibility. Even if we were to expose students within segregated schools to a wide array of authors and styles of learning, we would still be constricting them to interactions with peers and teachers of similar cultures and backgrounds. Integrating these schools can, alternatively, create community that are not as homogenous and expand the exposure students get to varying perspectives and ways of life. In addition to promoting heterogeneity, this can also spark the potential for innovation and creative problem-solving; skills that are highly sought after in today’s fast-paced world. Segregation dismantles the bonds that can be beneficial for innovative thought and ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking that we tend to preach – quite literally because segregated youth are ‘boxed’ into environments where their views are cyclically validated.

On an epistemic level, integration creates an environment of truly diverse people; one that goes beyond diversity being superficially defined as growing up in separate neighborhoods

or socio-economic class ranging on a scale from middle to upper class. This not only allows for the sharing of information and perspectives, but also leaves room for individuals to challenge existing assumptions present across the community. While this may connote that the assumptions needing to be challenged are of the dominant group in the community, I mean for this to apply bi-directionally – in that the dominant and marginalized group, both, hold assumptions that benefit and/or protect them in their interactions with society. This being said, it is no secret that privilege allows individuals to create or subconsciously abide by preconceptions that benefit them, which results in a need for those without such privileges to break down these assumptions and educate them otherwise. I will elaborate on this further in the next chapter.

Encouraging the co-existence of previously segregated communities can also develop the sense of self-respect that individuals, particularly youth, hold on an existential level. Philosopher and ex-Dean of Columbia College, Michele Moody-Adams comments on self-respect and the existential impact it can have on an individual's sense of value and ability. She first defines the fundamental component of self-respect as “the conviction that one best affirms one's own value by using one's abilities and talents to contribute to one's survival” (Moody-Adams 252). Her piece, “Race, Class, and the Social Construction of Self-Respect”, references anecdotal accounts of Black and white American children and argues that the race and class-based expectations we develop about individuals, influence their ability to develop and maintain self-respect throughout their lifetime (251-252). A lack of self-respect may result in an individual attributing hardship and disadvantages they face, such as in a segregated schooling environment, to their own lack of capability, Moody-Adams explains. Thus, integrating individuals in an overall better-resourced and (seemingly) equal environment, may allow them to regain a sense of trust and confidence in their own talent and ability to self-preserve for the future. Without diving into a detailed

evaluation of her piece, which I highly recommend interested readers to engage with, I simply want to make the point that integration is a mechanism by which we can revise such expectations and hope to uplift individuals' sense of self-respect.

At this point, some readers may be criticizing the naivety of this view of integration, and the benefits it may reap. I want to acknowledge that these are purely theoretical benefits that we may be affording our youth, if achieved. I recognize the difficulties we face, particularly in effectively implementing an ideal form of integration. These difficulties are the reason we have notoriously failed in our project to fully integrate our educational system, and part of the motivation for this piece. The exponential ripple effects that this failure has resulted in are complex and so well-ingrained in the *system*, that we cannot chart a bulletproof path forward without hesitation. I begin to explore some of these difficulties as well as the dangers associated with integration in the following chapter, with the aim of providing a balanced evaluation of this multifarious task.

## CHAPTER 3

### *The Dangers of Assimilation and Associated Pitfalls of Integration*

In the previous chapter, I first outlined the practical benefits of integration, followed by the epistemic and existential benefits that are possible. With regards to the pitfalls of integration, I believe we face the greatest danger from an epistemic standpoint, but I will include additional examples of practical and existential implications in my discussion as well. I will be relying on Nora Berenstain's piece, "Epistemic Exploitation" to reveal the vicious cycle that integration may trap a marginalized group in.

Nora Berenstain coined the term, "epistemic exploitation" to explain the phenomenon I mentioned in the previous chapter. She explains that "epistemic exploitation occurs when privileged persons compel marginalized persons to produce an education or explanation about the nature of the oppression they face" (Berenstain 570). This is categorized as one, among many, forms of epistemic oppression that marginalized groups must face – in addition to literal forms of oppression that have designated their status as marginalized to begin with. In line with an ideology that is white-centric in this nation, the epistemic exploitation of marginalized groups, namely the Black community, is just another example of the way in which the system has been constructed to maintain and benefit such an ideology. The needs of a white dominant group are maintained by a Black marginalized group laboring to educate those who continue to benefit from this very system.

Berenstain references terms commonly used, primarily by members of the dominant group, to mask this form of exploitation as a normalized form of engagement. Between "exercising harmless curiosity" and "playing devil's advocate", she argues that these

“euphemistic covers frame epistemic exploitation as a virtuous epistemic related to the pursuit of truth” (571). In this process, those burdened by inequality are put in a position to forcibly educate those privileged enough to have pre-existing access to knowledge and information. Carrying this burden also limits these same individuals from developing their own intellectual resources and frameworks in an attempt to build the capital to defend themselves against the dominant group. As is hopefully clear, this creates an insidious cycle that keeps the marginalized group trapped.

My discussion of Chomsky on the purpose of education in the chapter above explores the use of our educational systems as a mechanism for indoctrination. This gives rise to another pitfall of integration, one which masks the dangers of assimilation. Reiterating the definition of assimilation mentioned in the introduction, this connotes a marginalized population assuming the cultural beliefs and practices of a majority group. This compromises the identity and culture of one group – almost always the minority group. This group is lured in with the resources and limitless access to knowledge that integration can afford them, but faces the danger of comprising their inherent values and self-identity in the process. Unification of these groups is presented as an ideal that the marginalized group must labor (more significantly, at least) to process and match. We have built, and continue to maintain, a system that can be metaphorized as a melting pot – assimilating the beliefs, experiences, and knowledge of the groups thrown into it to produce a fused product which we call integration. To maintain the representation of whiteness as the construct with which we lead our society, our past efforts have sacrificed a more just appetite of a tossed salad for a cohesive result.

To preserve their identity against this ‘melting pot’, Black and other marginalized groups have opted to self-segregate. This has been construed as a counterargument to integration, as it



threatens the supposed potential for its success. The following section provides an analysis and evaluation on the moral permissibility of self-segregation, when practiced by the dominant and marginalized group.

### *Moral Permissibility of Self-segregation*

A counterargument in the fight for integration is the prevalence of self-segregation. This chapter draws from Kwame Appiah's "Racisms" and selections from Tommie Shelby's *Dark Ghettos* to provide a comparative analysis on the moral permissibility of self-segregation. The purpose of this chapter is to separate the moral permissibility of self-segregation of Black communities from white communities, based on the fundamental motivations and extent of harm caused by each. Appiah and Shelby approach their discussions of racism as an ideology that results in the oppression of communities of a particular race and allows for inequalities and disadvantages to persist in their treatment in society. This is the ideology with which schools in the United States were segregated to begin with, and one that must be critically reflected on to chart a path forward. From here, I will further my discussion about the desirability of integration, incorporating the possibilities and moral permissibility of retaliative self-segregation from both communities.

Appiah and Shelby open their respective works by defining racism in ways most appropriate to their arguments. Appiah uses three doctrines of racialism, extrinsic racism, and intrinsic racism to "express the theoretical content" of what we know as racism (Appiah 4). His elaboration on the distinctions between them, as well as how they build upon each other, can help to explain the moral permissibility of self-segregation and social closure among marginalized groups. Similarly, Shelby introduces racism as an ideology that carries "implicit judgements that misrepresent significant social realities", causing the racial injustices that can be

seen in society today (Shelby 22). Both philosophers support the justification of self-segregation and social closure when practiced by Black or other marginalized groups, in comparison to whites, on the basis of existing ideological resistance against them. This is one of the primary points of contention in the fight for educational integration, as it leaves a morally permissible ‘loophole’ for Black students to self-segregate even in an integrated school community. My purpose in discussing this is to allow readers to weigh the importance of such a ‘loophole’ in evaluating integration efforts – something I am still grappling with myself.

The common thread in the three doctrines Appiah identifies is the differential treatment of someone due to their race, whether driven by a belief in a racial essence (racialism), in certain traits that warrant differential treatment (extrinsic racism), or in hierarchical moral status of races (intrinsic racism). These doctrines are not only applied to an individual, but generalized to all members of a race and acted upon as such. The results of these actions include the potential for harm to be inflicted on members of marginalized races, varying on the scale from racialism to the “cognitive incapacity” that intrinsic racists experience, according to Appiah (Appiah 6). He explains the existence of such a phenomenon when the position one occupies in the world is beneficial to them, and thus the acceptance of this ideology can protect their own self-interests. This gives rise to “the notion of false consciousness”, and the even more “problematic notion of self-deception”, which applies to the ideology-adopting individual and to the racially marginalized individual who may have internalized the negative effects of such ideologies (7). This internalization sits at the core of the moral justification of self-segregation or social closure practiced by Black communities and others who are racially marginalized.

Shelby’s moral justification of Black self-segregation references Elizabeth Anderson’s work on the Imperative of Integration. He argues that “black self-segregation in neighborhoods

need not violate blacks' duty of justice, and thus justice cannot require neighborhood integration" (Shelby 59). Based on the concern of hostile attitudes, as a form of ideological resistance as discussed above, some Black folks may choose to avoid residing in primarily white neighborhoods. In other circumstances, it may be a more constrained choice, as a result of exclusionary action against them – a prominent historical example being designated to non-white schools and district – or economic strains they may face. I have read and heard the objection that some exclusionary practices by Black folks, towards white, also play into social network dynamics. The unfortunate reality, as Shelby alludes to, is that Black communities' control of organizations or resources is limited, and their lack of power does not exactly bar or burden whites from attaining these resources in reality.

Shelby also notes an important distinction between self-segregation and "closing ranks", which is a "defensive tactic a group uses to strengthen its internal social ties and to exclude outsiders from (full) affiliation", practiced by all racial groups (60). Integrated neighborhoods may consist of these formal and/or informal closed institutions, and the practice of residential self-segregation can also be a form of closing ranks. This isn't to say that Black folks who may self-segregate or opt for social-closure are always innocent of "prejudice toward other groups", but can and do make such choices out of vulnerability in being marginalized, and in the hopes for justice in the communities they are a part of (60) I fully agree with Shelby on the point that this same sense of empowerment or justice-driven approach to self-segregation cannot be applied to, or justified for, white folks, as they simply don't experience the racial injustices and mistreatment in question.

Both philosophers address potential objections to this moral permissibility, on the basis that the push for Black residential communities may be "politically motivated or conceived as

resistance to injustice”, hinting at potential race-based intentions of Black folks towards white (61). Appiah clarifies that racial solidarity, inherently, is not racist, but becomes so when it is acted upon to use “race as a basis for inflicting harm” (Appiah 10). Thus, the lack of harm (in the form of furthering mistreatment or barring access to resources) being inflicted as a result of Black self-segregation, in comparison to similar practices by whites, justifies their decision on moral grounds. Additionally, Shelby notes that “a commitment to Black solidarity should be distinguished from a desire for black community” (Shelby 61). Their racial solidarity may simply manifest as wanting to maintain their own socio-political institutions, and allow for their residential community to primarily cater to their preferences and needs. This does not apply the other way around, as the offerings of predominantly white neighborhoods will be largely uninfluenced by the introduction or establishment of Black communities - again, as a result of the socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged position they occupy in society.

I suspect that the discussion of moral permissibility of self-segregation and social closure combines the various reasons that members of different races may want to conduct the practice, and thus sparks controversy when it comes to justifying it for some and not others. As Shelby acknowledges, I agree that the impermissibility of practices driven by racial prejudice should be clear and established. I don't, however, think this should blend into the debate of reasons for such actions that are the result of racial injustices. We need an entirely separate set of considerations to assess the extent to which Black folks can act upon their choices of social closure, especially in relation to education where the element of choice may be limited and force circumstantial decisions of self-segregation. As it stands, integration largely disallows Black communities to act on these choices and it is this failure of integration that dominant

communities can manipulate – blaming Black folks for self-segregating without providing the resources or social capital they would need to act otherwise.

So far, we have discussed benefits, pitfalls, dangers, and potential objections of integration. An important final addition to this discussion is that of echo chambers and epistemic bubbles which, simply, are forms of social structures or networks wherein a particular group's voice overshadows another to varying degrees. This is explored in the following section.

### *Echo Chambers, Epistemic Bubbles, and a Social Reboot*

In the discussion of racial integration, I want to highlight the potential for echo chambers and/or epistemic bubbles that shape the mentalities and perspective from which Black folks are unequally treated. Specifically, I will highlight the difficulties of conducting a social 'reboot' of our resulting belief systems – as a preemptive response to those who deem it a solution to systemic racism. This is an important epistemic, and potentially existential, concept to consider as it holds the power to shape the information being disseminated in our world. I firmly believe in the epistemic duties all individuals hold towards knowledge contribution, and thus the threat of misinformation and difficulties of escaping an indoctrinating structure make this all-the-more important for all individuals – beyond those exclusively trapped within the structure. I will be evaluating C Thi Nguyen's analysis about these phenomena in his article, "Escape the Echo Chamber".

Nguyen starts by clearly distinguishes between the two phenomena as forms of information subversion, and focuses on the difficulties associated with echo chambers, possessing cult-like characteristics. He argues that a *social-epistemic reboot* is the escape route from an echo chamber, requiring a "deep-cleanse of one's whole belief system". I will first

provide a summary of Nguyen's analysis of conceptual differences between these phenomena, the dangers and values of echo chambers, and the potential escape routes he suggests. Next, I will argue for the need and significance of a *social-epistemic reboot*, present potential objections to its practicality, and acknowledge the role that convenience can play in our gripping to echo chambers. I will then respond to these potential objections, in line with Nguyen's standpoint on the topic. I conclude with a relatively pessimistic view of our ability to escape echo chambers, and attempt to provide additional, more practical solutions of my own.

Nguyen opens the piece expressing his concern for the state of our current flow of information where he states, "it seems like different intellectual communities no longer share basic foundational beliefs" (Nguyen 1). Alignment of foundational beliefs is how we, as a society, have established our very basic norms and methods of sourcing information; this poses a serious threat to the credibility of information in its entirety. As discussed earlier, we have assigned lower credibility to Black communities, and in the case of education, barred them for accessing – let alone defining – some of these norms and methods of sourcing information entirely. He defines, and explains the formation process of *epistemic bubbles* and *echo chambers* ; clearly distinguishing between the two. An epistemic bubble is defined as, "an informational network from which relevant voices have been excluded by omission" (Nguyen 2). In such a bubble, external perspectives are intentionally not considered, and the question of a motivational problem as opposed to an epistemological problem comes into question. An echo chamber, in addition to being an epistemic bubble that disregards opposing views, "is a social structure form which other relevant voices have been actively discredited" (Nguyen 2). Echo chambers have a malicious backdrop fueling them, where there is an active effort, backed by a fully trusting community, to undermine external, largely marginalized perspectives.

While both are systematic ways in which people disregard and exclude information for the sake of their own beliefs, an echo chamber poses threats far more difficult to combat. All echo chambers are considered epistemic bubbles in some form, but not all epistemic bubbles are necessarily echo chambers. This also results in both phenomena requiring distinct forms of intervention to combat the dangers they present. Epistemic bubbles hugely enhance the self-confidence of anyone caught within them due to the filters placed on the information they chose (whether that choice was their own or made for them) to acknowledge. The primary function of these bubbles is to suppress any form of potential disagreement. A clear example of this can be drawn from Jean Anyon's study of New Jersey public schools, discussed earlier. The affluent schools, here, would be considered the epistemic bubble that results in its students suppressing the knowledge or perspective that working class school students may bring if integrated. This, technically, should not have an impact on those students' confidence in their perspective, as they are purposely surrounded by fellow supporters – peers, teachers, and families – but can very easily turn into an epistemic bubble that then excludes anyone with a different or comparatively under-developed perspective. Nguyen references Sanford Goldberg; epistemic bubbles lack “coverage-reliability”, as the information being received cannot be considered sufficiently representative of everything that is relevant (Nguyen 3). The solution to this, in simple terms, is to expose potential members of such bubbles to perspectives they have missed and in turn, pop the bubble itself. In Anyon's example, this may mean physically placing students in an integrated classroom and allowing for the natural exposure of their starkly different perspective on the definition of knowledge – allowing for both groups of students to engage with a world outside their respective bubbles.

Echo chambers, unfortunately, “are a far more pernicious and robust phenomenon”, according to Nguyen (Nguyen 4). He cites Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Frank Cappella’s book analyzing the formation and threats of an echo chamber. Due to extreme alienation from external sources, echo chambers enforce an active mistrust and undermine any opposing source. Nguyen argues that “the result is a rather striking parallel to the techniques of emotional isolation typically practised in cult indoctrination” (4). The altered views on credible sources and active dismissal of ‘outsiders’ trains people in echo chambers to withstand any potential exposure to contrary views, and thus risks reinforcement of their own views as in a cult-like community. Members of an echo chamber are not truth-averse or “irrational, but [have been] systematically misinformed about where to place their trust”, and for this there is no one person we can point the blame towards (Nguyen 8). This reiterates the systemic nature of such structures – the most glaring one being racism. Echo chambers completely readjust one’s values and systems of belief, which can pose potentially greater threats when these individual interact with greater society, clearly evident in cases of racial segregation, and thus must be treated with a much more specific and intensive solution.

Nguyen first offers a solution of promoting intellectual autonomy as a way to combat the formation of echo chambers by excessive trust in others. Within the piece itself, Nguyen presents an opposing argument that “we are irredeemably dependent on each other in almost every domain of knowledge” (Nguyen 5). While echo chambers attack the sense of vulnerability associated with trusting others for knowledge, there is no possible way for individuals to think entirely for themselves in the modern age of information. Thus, the escape route Nguyen presents is a *social-epistemic reboot*, which draws from René Descartes’ methodology of a *Cartesian epistemic reboot*. Nguyen acknowledges that being caught in an echo chamber can be



the result of upbringing as well as bad faith, as it traps anyone in a “momentary lapse of intellectual vigilance” (8). The chamber then systematizes the order in which information is received by its members, and distorts their ability to rationally sort through evidence in order to equally treat all sources. Once caught in this uncontrollable trap, members are unable to differentiate between prior and post-chamber-induced beliefs, and thus we must suspend them to essentially gather knowledge from scratch.

He explains the necessity of temporarily suspending beliefs, through an example of a teenage girl, stating, “she must begin afresh *socially* - she must reconsider all possible sources of information with a presumptively equanimous eye” (Nguyen 11). In the case of the echo chamber being the result of one’s upbringing, this will allow for an escape from the conditioning of their guardians. In order to re-establish any sense of trust in external voices, the system must be shaken at its core, and a complete reboot is the only escape route that can cause this. Nguyen presents the case of Derik Black, someone raised by a neo-Nazi father in Florida, as an example emphasizing the need for such a reboot - to separate the damaging trust associated with a connection as personal as a father and son (Nguyen 12). He acknowledges the impact that demonstration of goodwill, as in the Black example, can have on being able to slowly break apart the echo chamber. Despite the presentation of this escape route, he concludes the piece explaining the lack of guarantee that trust can be re-established at all, and that there is a desperate need for intervention. This is where we stand with the task to correct the impacts of segregation, which reiterates the validity of the self-segregation argument, among others, as the lack of guarantee persists in any solution we have considered thus far.

The biggest potential objection, in my view, with a reboot of the nature Nguyen suggests would be one of practical implementation. How does one train themselves or induce such a

thing? How, if at all, can we ensure a positive and/or sustainable impact? How can we avoid the possibility of misinformation if and when one were to leave an echo chamber? The direct, and unfortunate, answer to these questions is that we can't. There is no standardized method through which one can conduct this reboot, according to Nguyen, as it is an especially individual process. We don't know if their trust in institutions will ever be completely reestablished, or if that will result in both practical and epistemic benefits to all groups involved, as there is no concrete way to test this.

In line with Nguyen's perspective, I do acknowledge that these are unanswerable questions and prominent worries to hold. This gives rise to an overarching epistemological question of how we place our beliefs and gain knowledge if 'the whole world' is trying to deceive us. Especially for a marginalized population, the nature of this worry is exacerbated to not only include potential for misinformation and deceit, but also the possibility for the system to re-establish itself. Instead of asking how one can gain knowledge given the risk of society's institutions being un-trustworthy or less deserving, members of echo chambers need to be led through an evaluation of the risk associated with their current methods of gaining knowledge. I think we need to focus on the value of coherentism; the formation of a mutually-supportive network of beliefs as opposed to one-directional beliefs that are justified only by simpler beliefs. I firmly believe that decisions made with more cohesive and wider-representative pieces of knowledge and information are more productive than potentially more desirable decisions made within a vacuumed scope. Unfortunately, desirability trumps what I think of as our epistemic duty towards knowledge consumption in most cases.

Each individual recognizing and attempting to escape, through such a suggested reboot, will allow for a butterfly effect on other members and in an ideal world, on leaders of cult-like

social structures like racism. As naive as it may sound, I see genuine value in a “why?”, “why not?” approach to emphasize the fact that echo chamber members have nothing left to lose in terms of individual belief systems and/or knowledge-gathering. We could build from the notion of echo chambers as safety nets to some who are trapped within them, and present Nguyen’s reboot as a method to “test their strength” in being able to withstand conflicting viewpoints. Devising strategies and facilitation methods to conduct such a *social-epistemic reboot* are essential, as opposed to putting the pressure on individuals to analyze and reboot themselves; I think this pressure alone could theoretically detract members from wanting to conduct the reboot and attempt leaving the ‘nest’ of their echo chamber.

The conception of Nguyen’s *social-epistemic reboot* as an escape from an echo chamber is still one almost entirely in theory. As much as the strategies or approaches mentioned might have some value to them, I am pessimistic about our ability to implement them in a way that is strong enough to combat the ever-growing echo chambers in our polarized society. We are at a stage where the risk of falling into such structures, which subvert information flow and knowledge consumption, is too high to avoid, even if one were to escape an echo chamber. This should not mean that we just sit tight and do nothing to try to combat it, but we may have to consider a reboot that is not solely dependent on individuals’ ability to reflect and revise all they have ever known. The paradox of echo chambers is that members, once trapped within them, are not able to trigger such a reboot, as Nguyen explains, and external members of society have their own set of valid reservations about attempting to do so. This, among many other epistemological discussions, remains without complete resolution, but I hope this analysis provides an understanding of the complexities and dangers of such social structures to hopefully fuel our combative efforts towards.

## CONCLUSION

So where does this leave us? Hopefully, in a position to better understand and engage with this topic at-large. The intention of this discussion was to shed light on the realities of segregation and some of the key implications of integration in an America plagued by the historical conflict of a dominant white group and a marginalized Black group. To reiterate, my goal was not to provide a historical analysis of persistent inequalities, or to provide a solution to this systemic issue – as much as I wish this were possible. I did, however, aim to provide insights into the complexities of this issue and stress the importance of the epistemic considerations it is owed.

Social structures in this nation continue to be grounded in, and centered around an ideology dictated by whiteness. I presented race as a problem of social value, in alignment with Christopher Lebron, to reiterate this and to argue for the fundamental inequality present in assigning one's status in, and access to, society based on their race. I chose to ground this discussion in an educational context, as one that was relatable and one with explicit cases of failure that persist today. A white dominant mentality did not allow for Black values to be acknowledged, let alone respected, and this reality motivated the need to approach this discussion using a non-ideal theory approach, drawing from Elizabeth Anderson.

My exploration of the epistemic benefits of integration included references to a study conducted by Jean Anyon, which I hope highlighted an unfortunate reality of segregated schools, and thus a need to integrate. I also referenced Noam Chomsky's perspective on the purpose of education to fuel this need, and discussed the possibility of maintaining or increasing an individual's sense of self-respect, as evaluated by Michele Moody Adams. I then spent most of my remaining discussion framing the pitfalls of integration, focusing on the result of epistemic

exploitation – as coined by Nora Berenstain- and the dangers of assimilation. The final sections were spent providing examples of self-segregation as a threat, and thus a counterargument, to integration and the vulnerability of exposing our knowledge acquisition and contribution to echo chambers, referencing analyses from Kwame Appiah Anthony, Tommie Shelby, and C Thi Nguyen to do so.

Integration, in its ideal and truly just form, needs to include a fundamental shift in the mentalities of both dominant and marginalized groups to acknowledge one another as peoples and communities that are part of a collective whole. This ‘whole’ needs to appreciate, instead of absorb, the diverse values and experiences of those it contains to produce knowledge that is justly representative of its components. I am not insinuating that integration may only be successful if all members of society benefited equally from it; rather, that all members are equally able to access the resources to allow them to benefit. How do we do this successfully? That is where I, and others commenting on the subject, are also stumped.

Does this mean we resegregate or move towards becoming colorblind to race? Do we need to spend more time drilling critical race theory into our youth? What if our next solution goes too far; is there a ‘too far’? I expect these are just some of the questions and thoughts prompted by this discussion, and hope to, one day, be able to answer them with clarity. In the meantime, an initial step I *can* recommend is to ensure we are creating accessible spaces for individuals to keep this discussion at the forefront of their minds. In an attempt to mobilize our society to tackle racial inequality, we must first make it permissible for people to talk about their racism – and then find less-taxing ways to correct unjust mentalities. Affinity groups, intersectional discussions, and courses on the philosophy of race are just some of the numerous avenues we must capitalize on as we persist in this project of integration.

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