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Thoroughly Mixed Yet Thoroughly Ethnic: Indexing Class with Ethnonyms

This article considers the roles played by ethnic mentions, or ethnonyms, in the discursive reconstruction of a former neighborhood in Easton, Pennsylvania, "Syrian Town." We argue that these labels engage in the production of ethnic difference by depicting a social world composed of discrete types while presupposing a local class divide and a contrasting neighborhood imagined as elite and privileged. In this way, speakers narrating stories of bygone days are taking a particular stance toward the diversity of their former neighborhood and the segregated cityscape of contemporary times, thereby challenging a once-dominant chain of indexicality. We conclude by arguing that close attention to vernacular usage allows us to advance our understanding of the relative importance of racial, ethnic, and class-based distinctions in specific locales, and challenges hegemonic constructions of the evolution of a Black-White binary in twentieth-century American cities. [racialization, ethnonyms, class, ethnicity, whiteness, indexicality, deixis, adequation, distinction, Lebanese]

Studying Race, Ethnicity and Class through Ethnonyms

In those days, the Lebanese, the Jews, the Italians, the Afro-Americans . . . all lived mixed, one right after the other. (Anne, a Lebanese woman)
I had a lot of Lebanese friends, Lebanese, Syrian, Blacks, everything. (Jerry, a Black man)

In our interviews with elderly former residents of a diverse neighborhood in Easton, Pennsylvania, we were struck by narrators' liberal use of ethnic mentions, or ethnonyms, as we see in the passages here. As they described life in the now completely razed section of the city once known as "Syrian Town," they emphasized the neighborhood's unity, describing it as close-knit, a "happy family" composed of people of diverse ethnic backgrounds. This article takes a close look at the semiotics of ethnic labeling in these narratives. Other recent research on ethnic mentions has highlighted the racializing presuppositions the labels index (De Fina 2000; Wortham et al. 2011). We too find indexicality central to unraveling the full import of local ethnonymic usage, but rather than indexing race, we will argue that the labels work to describe a certain kind of place, and indirectly point to a deeper class divide characterizing different regions of the city.

The very persistence of ethnic labeling is noteworthy on another level, for it raises questions about a dominant narrative of the relationship of ethnicity to race and

whiteness in recent U.S. history. Scholars in U.S. immigration history and whiteness studies have argued that people of recent European immigrant backgrounds began to view themselves less as members of distinct ethnic groups and more in racial terms by the middle of the twentieth century (Bayer 2009; Brodtkin 1998; Guglielmo 2004; Hirsch 1983, 2004; Jacobson 1998; Ignatiev 1995; Kazal 2004; Roediger 1991, 2005). This development and the related emergence of a White racial identity are often associated with the "new racial alchemy" (Jacobson 1998:8) created by migrations of African-Americans from the South and subsequent competition over resources, especially housing (Guglielmo 2004; Hirsch 1983). According to this perspective, immigrants or their descendants adopted the prevailing national racial classification scheme rooted in a Black-White binary, moving from "Irish" (or "Italian," "Jewish," and so forth) to "white" (Bayer 2009:13), a process some have termed "Americanization through racism" (Myrdal 1962[1944]; see also Guglielmo 2004:59). As scholars turn to ethnographic research, however, they sometimes find local circumstances at odds with the dominant narrative, with ethnic- and class-based identities confounding a clear racial binary (Errington 1987; Hartigan 1999; Inoue 1989; Modan 2001). As John Hartigan has argued, "racial identities are produced and experienced distinctly in different locations, shaped by dynamics that are not yet fully comprehended" (1999:14); the following study contributes to our understanding of these dynamics.

After a heightened attention to ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists have returned to race, underscoring its perduring character (Sanjek 1994:109). Linguistic anthropology has played an important role in this scholarship: researchers often point out the ironic persistence of racism "in a country where to call a person 'racist' is a deep insult" (Hill 2008:vi), which suggests covert processes at work. Covert racializing discourses, "which racialize without being denotatively explicit about race" (Dick and Wirtz 2011:E2), are pervasive and centrally involved in the continued maintenance of racial distinctions and their material consequences. As Hilary Dick and Kristina Wirtz explain, "racial stereotypes are so highly presupposed that only a few subtle cues may be sufficient to invoke them" (2011:5).

Indexicality is an important focus of many language-centered explorations of covert racialization (Anderson 2008; Hill 1998, 2005, 2008:128–155; Modan 2001, 2007; Trechter and Bucholtz 2001:16; Trechter 2001; Wortham et al. 2011). In her publications on language socialization, Ochs (1990, 1992) distinguishes direct from indirect indexicality. In direct indexicality, there is an unmediated relation between "one or more linguistic forms and some contextual dimension" (1990:295). In indirect indexicality, "a feature of the communicated event is evoked indirectly through the indexing of some *other* feature of the communicative event. In these cases, the feature of the communicative event directly indexed is conventionally linked to and helps to constitute some second feature of the communicative context, such that the indexing of one evokes or indexes the other" (1990:295). An illustration of these processes can be found in Jane Hill's work on Mock Spanish. In her analysis, when adopted by White native English speakers, Mock Spanish directly indexes a "positive colloquial persona" while indirectly presupposing a "deep background involving the reproduction and production of racist negative stereotypes of Spanish speakers (2005:114; see also 1993, 1998). Building on this scholarship, we also investigate the role of indexicality in the construction of difference, but rather than focusing on processes of racialization, we will look at "class-ification."

Race exists in complex and often reinforcing relationships with gender, ethnicity and class, among other important grounds for difference (see Urciuoli 2011:118). These latter variables are sometimes left out of the analysis, however, leaving a sense that the only social division of relevance to Americans is the Black-White racial binary. Class in particular can fall out of focus, as John Hartigan, Jr. (1999) has argued in his discussion of whiteness in Detroit. In our study, ethnonyms are important clues allowing us to understand the relative significance of race, ethnicity, and class in this one location.

Anthropologists often commence their studies of culturally complex communities with explorations of the semiotics of labels associated with the classification of popu-

lations (Beissinger 2001; Galaty 1982). Even single ethnonyms merit close analysis, with key terms taking on different meanings depending on conversational context (Galaty 1982; Larson 1996; Proschan 1997). As Proschan writes, "through closely focused attention to the detailed operations of ethnonymic systems in social and conversational contexts, we may begin to discern how these models are conceived and instantiated in given settings" (1997:93). In their discussion of whiteness, Trechter and Bucholtz defend works that take seriously folk labels: "to invoke an identity category is not necessarily to fall into the trap of essentialism or reification. It may simply be sound anthropology. . . . If we are to do ethnographic justice to the people we study, we must use the categories that are meaningful to them" (2001:8). We find that the local idioms we encountered challenge scholarly categories, and reveal the "gap" between the "certainty encompassed by experts' designations of 'racial' and the uncertainty or instability of deployments of the term by 'natives'" (Hartigan 1999:15).

Ethnonyms can participate in racialization. In their study of payday mugging stories, Wortham et al. (2011) analyze "signs of identity" and show how speakers draw on images of people that both speakers and hearers presuppose, images tied to different "models of personhood" (Agha 2007). They focus on how members of different ethnoracial groups (Black, Mexicans, and Whites) use payday mugging stories in differently racializing ways. Similarly, in her study of the use of "ethnic mentions" in Mexican immigrants' narratives, De Fina identifies a corpus of such stories that make evaluative statements about different ethnoracial populations. In these "argumentative stories" (Van Dijk 1993:126), speakers are making a persuasive point orienting the hearer to certain conclusions about different types of people (De Fina 2000:145). In addition to argumentative stories, De Fina notes instances where speakers' use of ethnic labels are relevant in light of the story world, "conveying implicit assumptions about the way ethnicity determines relationships between social agents in the real world," without being the main point of the narrative (2000:139). The relevance, she says, depends on the speaker's relationship to the interactional world and/or the story world.

Narratives involving "ethnic mentions" are not necessarily making wider statements about the types of peoples mentioned in the stories, however, nor do they necessarily engage in processes of racialization. While we feel that the narratives we analyze are "argumentative," the persuasive points being made do not concern the specific types of peoples referenced, but instead the qualities of the *neighborhood* under discussion. Our speakers reference ethnicity to make an argumentative point not about a specific ethnic group, but about the *story world*, a world of narratives about "Syrian Town" in past times, conflating two of the categories De Fina identifies. Moreover, our work finds that through indexical associations, ethnonyms can be implicated in processes of class-ification: by telling narratives rich in ethnonyms, our speakers directly index their former membership in an ethnically rich community, and indirectly claim a particular class status. In order to understand our speakers' use of ethnic labels, then, we must explore both the story world in which they engaged (reminiscences about "Syrian Town") and the interactional context during which they described the story world.

Ethnographic Context: The Power of Place

The neighborhood in question, "Syrian Town," was located at the heart of downtown Easton, Pennsylvania, a town of 35,000 people located 60 miles north of Philadelphia. This was a mixed-use neighborhood comprised of brick, stone, and frame single-family residences, row houses, and independently owned cafés, and grocery, shoe, clothing and drug stores. A succession of people of different national origins resided there starting with German and English immigrants in the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, followed by Irish, Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants, free Blacks,¹ Italians (largely from Sicily), "Syrians," and a second wave of Blacks from southern states who arrived in the 1920s and 1930s.

The "Syrians" of "Syrian Town" were Maronite Christians from what is now Lebanon. Arabic-speaking immigrants had been coming to the United States from parts of the Ottoman Empire since the late nineteenth century, the majority of whom were Christians from the Empire's Syrian province (Naff 1993:9). Concentrations of these immigrants were found in U.S. cities by the 1920s and often identified as "Little Syria" or "Syrian Town" (see Hooglund 1987a:12; Naff 1993). A large number of these migrants started as peddlers. Our interviewees remembered their relatives walking miles from Easton's center to sell notions to farmers in the surrounding townships. After they accumulated enough capital, many Syrian peddlers established family-run groceries and dry-goods stores (Naff 1993:17), again, the pattern locally.

Easton's multiethnic "Syrian Town" was obliterated by urban renewal projects in the mid-1960s. City officials conducted a complete survey of its structures in 1960, which recommended only 16 percent of the dwellings for "repair or demolition" (Knowles n.d.; City of Easton 1960). What happened next was remarkable.² To receive federal funds for urban renewal, local authorities had to provide a rationale for land clearance. Because the buildings were in decent shape, they based their claim on the fact that it was a mixed-use area, with shops, industry, and residences in close proximity, which also qualified as evidence of "blight." In this way, they could argue that the area was "99.9 percent blighted" (Knowles 1962:28). "Syrian Town" was demolished a few years later,³ and its residents forced to other sections of the city, surrounding suburban towns, or other states. In its place today are a series of high-rise buildings for the elderly, a hotel, a defunct movie theater, and a few strip malls and parking lots.

Despite its demise, "Syrian Town" lives on in the memories of its former residents, and locals who remember its unique racial and ethnic mixture. Indeed, this "mixed" character was what first attracted us to this project. This article is part of a longer, community-based research project that has as its central focus the collection of oral history narratives of neighborhood life. The present work is based on research from 2007 to 2011 involving taped and untaped interviews with former residents who self-identified as "Lebanese," "Black," "Italian," "Sicilian," "Irish," "German," and "American," a usage we adopt here. The interviewees to date have all been white women: a college professor and four student-researchers.⁴ We located interviewees through the "snowball" method, starting with leaders of the local Maronite and Lutheran churches. We were assisted by a robust local interest in the neighborhood's elementary school, "Thomas" School,⁵ which was demolished in 1962. A reunion for former students held in May 2008 was so successful that its participants sought to organize follow-up reunions, and we assisted in these endeavors. Large focus-group discussions were held during school reunions we sponsored at a church located across from the site of the former school, during a "Father's Day" dinner hosted by the local Maronite Church, and at successive "Lebanese nights" held at a local bar. We taped casual discussions at these events, and followed up with taped private interviews at the public library and at interviewees' homes in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. We asked open-ended questions following interview strategies common to ethnography and some oral historians that have a goal of avoiding imposing researchers' periodization and terminology on interviewees (Joutard 1983; Portelli 1991), starting interviews with general statements, such as "What was it like to grow up in Easton?" Documentary reconstruction of the neighborhood included our development of a house-by-house database of residents from an edition of Polk's City Directory published just prior to the mass evictions. Our data for this article include a corpus of narratives about life in the former "Syrian Town" drawn from field notes and transcribed taped interviews with 32 individuals.

Ages of our speakers ranged from 60 to 93, with most in their seventies and eighties (born between 1928 and 1936). They started elementary school from 1935 to 1942, and graduated from high school in the mid-1940s to 1950s, at which time most were starting families in the same neighborhood. Those of foreign origins were all born in the United States; many had parents or grandparents born in present-day

Lebanon or Italy. We met with an equal number of men and women. They told stories of "Syrian Town" as it was in the 1940s to the 1960s; their stories have an exact cutoff point because the neighborhood was destroyed so abruptly.

The special context of our interviews—discussions of a world that vanished almost overnight—provided an unusual point from which to hear our interviewees' narratives. Scholars of social memory regularly acknowledge that accounts of the past are necessarily colored by present-day considerations (Conway 2010:443; Yow 2005:35–67). However, our interviewees' memories of the old neighborhood seemed frozen since right before the demolition, reminiscent of "flashbulb memories," the distinct, clear memories that individuals hold from the time surrounding the occurrence of a traumatic experience (Brown and Kulik 1977).⁶ When we were with people who had lived in the neighborhood, they enthusiastically recalled the details of the old downtown area, arguing over names and locations of stores and homes, indicating their concern with accurate recollection of particulars that no longer exist.

An ethnographic vignette provides a sense of our research context and the population we have been meeting with. At the first elementary school reunion we held, many attendees hadn't seen each other in 50 years and we wondered if they would be able to connect across the many divides separating them. As the event commenced, one octogenarian suggested that we go around the room introducing everyone by name, street, and years at the school. For the women, it was essential to declare (loudly) their maiden name. At that point, other people often shouted out street names or siblings' nicknames before the speaker could: "Ah, Bank and South Fifth!" If there was any segregation at this event, it was by age as people sat along three long tables. Gloria, a spunky woman of German/English descent in her 80s joked with a Black male, Mark, who was nicely dressed in a bright gold blazer. He called her his "girlfriend." A small group of men of various races and ethnicities (Black, Lebanese, Sicilian) talked at length about town movie theatres and which street barricades they could get through when chased by the local police.

We now turn to the speakers' use of ethnonyms and their accounts of local patterns of sociability followed by a discussion of the semiotics of the labels and the additional meanings they index.

The Old Neighborhood in Contemporary Narrative

And, you might be sitting there at the table eating tomato sandwiches and you got a Black friend there, a Lebanese friend, Italian friend, a . . . you know . . . who knows, that was all one big happy family. (Larry, a Sicilian man)

We commenced this study assuming that narratives of neighborhood life would vary according to the ethnicity of the interlocutor, as Wortham et al. (2011) found. We did not find such a pattern in our data. Instead, we were struck by two trends exemplified by the passages that start this article: first, the emphasis on the harmonious relationships between people of different backgrounds, and second, the speakers' liberal use of ethnonyms.

People of these various backgrounds discussed their neighbors as members of a single community, and their bygone neighborhood as a place where people looked after each other. When we interviewed 89-year-old Anne, she started talking about a local dress store, "G'mans," where she liked to shop, and interrupted her story in the following way:

G'mans would order it for me. They were one of the best, they were a wonderful family. See, I'm Lebanese, they were Jewish. In those days, the Lebanese, the Jews, the Italians, the Afro-Americans . . . all lived mixed, one right after the other. Now, we went to each other's funerals, we went to each other's weddings, we were there for each other . . . and that is something that I will never forget. As I grew up, the world changed, you know, everything changed.

In a private conversation, an 80-year-old Black woman told us, "You were everybody's child." We heard similar statements in both private interviews and in group conversations. During the first reunion we organized, we taped a group of women as they reminisced together. Carol brought her 82-year old mother, Pam, of Sicilian descent. Also in the group were Linda, 75-years old of Irish/Welsh descent, and Vera, an octogenarian of Albanian ancestry. At one point, Pam's daughter Carol prompted a new line of discussion:

- Carol: You told me stories where everybody looked out for each other.
 Pam: Yeah, they did.
 Linda: Oh yeah, all the time. Everybody watched each other.
 Carol: It didn't matter if you were a child of the Italians, Lebanese, Black, whatever.
 Pam: No, it made no difference in those days.
 Linda: No.
 Pam: Not like today.
 Verna: As long as you treated us fine then you were fine. And everybody got along. I always hated it when they got rid of the Lebanese.

We could assume that portrayals of harmonious relations between the neighborhood's populations were largely the result of the speakers' overwhelming nostalgia for their lost neighborhood, or that the elderly speakers were emphasizing what they thought we wanted to hear. However, we should note that not all stories were positive. Many people reported micro-level residential segregation, for instance. Although he described his elementary school as "a melting pot," 84-year-old Jerry was also quick to point out the segregated nature of the city as a whole in prior times: "Being Black, we weren't allowed in many places." In another interview, he delineated the blocks that were open to Blacks and the blocks they couldn't live on. We began asking people of other backgrounds about this, and they concurred. Gloria responded as follows:

- A1:⁷ So there were little sub-neighborhoods within the neighborhood?
 Gloria: Yeah. Was [an] Italian section, Lebanese section. And I . . . I don't know about . . . there was Black people over I think, maybe there were on Canal Street, I'm not really sure. But they all blended in with us.

Pam, a woman of a similar age, of Sicilian background, also noted micro-segregation, particularly between Italians and Lebanese:

And on our street, Washington Street, the whole one side, and Lehigh Street, down lower, that was all Lebanese. Nothing but Lebanese lived there. They owned that section. . . . So the Lebanese came out to the front of Washington Street. That's as far as they got, because the Italians had the right side. And then . . . all the way down 5th Street was Italian, big 5th Street hill, they were Italian, then they were Italian on 4th Street, and a few Lebanese had got in there.

Despite concentrations of people of similar backgrounds on certain streets, on another level, the neighborhood as a whole was conceived of as one community. While Jerry was the most forthright about anti-Black discrimination in the past, perhaps reflecting his long-standing involvement in the local chapter of the NAACP, he also claimed that there was tremendous integration:

- A2: But you all went to school together.
 Jerry: Yeah, that was a melting pot. Everything, all nationalities went to Thomas School.
 A2: Yeah.
 Jerry: Thomas school was the first integrated school, I think, in the United States, because everybody went there [chuckling].
 A2: Did you all get along?
 Jerry: Oh yeah, we all got along. I mean, we, you know, like kids, you fist-fought, you know, but nobody was for, no group was for any special group. You had just as many people routing for you to win as for your opponents to beat you up. You know?

On another occasion, Jerry told us: "Italian, and Black, we all lived together. I picked up a little Italian, we all lived together." Pam, too, told us, "We didn't care where we lived, we were all friendly, we were all friendly, and we all loved each other." Another Black man in his eighties agreed. Mark was one of the most active of the reunion organizers, and he regularly sent us names of additional people to invite. On one occasion, in response to his depiction of the neighborhood as "a clustered community living close together," we responded that it sounded like a "real community". His reply was swift: "Oh yeah, like I said, we all played together. Eddie Berkat [Lebanese co-organizer of the reunion], that guy who was there, there were no prejudices, we all got along too well."

Larry, of Sicilian descent, concurred. He was interviewed in his home by college student Allison (AH), herself of Italian ancestry. After she commenced the 90-minute interview with a quick neutral question, he launched into a long monologue:

AH: Okay, so, can you describe your experience growing up or living in Easton?

Larry: I grew up right on South 5th Street [part of the renewal area]. That area was a large Italian community. Between 3rd Street and 6th Street and the Lehigh River and Northampton Street there was an Italian community, a Lebanese community, and a Lebanese community [sic]. And we all grew up together. There was no discrimination, nobody, no color, or religion or anything. Everybody grew up together in that area.

Later on in the interview, Allison asked specifically about the neighborhood's diversity:

AH: I know you kind of touched on this before a little bit, about sort of the diversity in the neighborhood, could you talk about that some more? Especially particularly like the Italian community's place within this larger ethnic community.

Larry: We, like I said, it was one happy family, we didn't . . . we didn't have color. There was, there was a lot of Jewish people, there was a lot of oh uh Lebanese people (matter of fact, I just got off the phone with one of, uh, a Lebanese fellow that I know, he's also an attorney, uh, still, that area down there, when they tore that area down they ripped out the Lebanese community, the Italian community, the Black community, and they scattered them all over. [We omit here a long passage in which he discusses how everybody now lives in the townships and shops in the malls]. But, we, we used to, you know, everybody got fed. You didn't have much, but you shared it. And, you might be sitting there at the table eating tomato sandwiches and you got a Black friend there, a Lebanese friend, Italian friend, a – you know – who knows, that was all one big happy family.

We can see several common themes from these passages. The neighborhood is described as a "melting pot" composed of "all nationalities." People portray inter-ethnic intimacy as in Larry's depiction of friends of different backgrounds eating lunch together and when he said, "Everybody grew up together in that area." He calls it a "big happy family." Anne talked about how everybody attended "each other's funerals." Along with the neighborhood's characterization as thoroughly mixed, we also found a pervasive and consistent use of ethnonyms. Not only was everyone associated with an ethnonym, but these labels were employed so liberally that they were almost more important, or certainly as important, as people's names. People often interrupted their stories to identify the ethnicities of the people involved. We can see this in Anne's quick shift from discussing her favorite dress shop to outlining in detail the neighborhood's diverse composition. We did not ask for this information at the start of the interviews, as is clear from Allison's initial prompt to Larry and his response in which he delineates the different "communities" among which he lived. The attorney Larry references is described as Lebanese first, and then as an attorney. In our taped interview, Anne regularly interrupted herself to include her characters' ethnic affiliation: "the Walkers! The Walkers was Afro-American, and they had a home which was gorgeous." In a similar interruption, another man told us, "Eddie J., the pharmacist at B- Apothecary—he's Lebanese—his cousin used to be a doctor."

Along with sections of city blocks and individuals, even shops and churches were associated with ethnic groups, and people talked about “their” bakery and “their” church in such a way that ethnic affiliation was implied. The Catholic Church community was ethnically segregated, as Larry explained:

When I was younger, St. Anthony’s was the Italian church, St. Bernard’s was the Irish church, St. Joseph’s was the German church, St. Michael’s was the Lithuanian church, Holy Name was the Ukrainian church, Our Lady of Lebanon was the Lebanese church – they’re all Catholic churches, but they all had their own specific thing and a lot of times if you went to church, say you went to St. Bernard’s church, you were uh frowned upon, you were Italian, you should go to St. Anthony’s.

The need to attach an ethnic label to individuals was so great that the absence of a label could completely derail a conversation. A discussion at one of the elementary school reunions between women of various backgrounds (Irish, Albanian, and Sicilian; ages 60 to 85), became almost comedic when one elderly woman kept interrupting the speaker, shouting, “Was she Greek?! “What, yes, she lived on . . .” “No . . . She was Greek?” “What?” “What was her nationality, was she Greek?”

Local Ethnonymic Usage

According to our informants, people could be categorized by approximately a dozen ethnonyms. Within this array of ethnosociological labels are some which in academic parlance would be considered “racial” labels (“Black,” “Colored,” “African-American,” “White”), others “ethnic” categories (“Lebanese,” “Italian,” “German,” “Irish,” “Lithuanian”), which could also designate citizenship status (“American,” “Italian,” and so forth), and still another that is “religious” in basis (“Jewish”). These labels are clues to local understandings of the social world. Moreover, although they are rooted in overlapping criteria, it is important to note that they were employed by our interviewees in an unproblematic, either/or, “digital” fashion (Eriksen 2002:174). There did not seem to be any question in people’s minds about this method of sorting people or their treatment of the categories as mutually exclusive.

We find it significant that we rarely encountered hyphenated nationality-based terms, such as “Lebanese-American,” even though the people we met and most of the subjects of their stories were American citizens. Our speakers were never concerned at all that the people they were describing as “Lebanese,” “German,” “Irish,” or “Italian” were in fact Lebanese-Americans, German-Americans, and so forth. We rarely heard the word “American” throughout any of our interviews except in the compound label, “African-Americans.” The label “White” was also exceedingly rare, as we develop further.

Some populations were designated by more than one ethnonym. It is common in multiethnic settings for people to employ different terms for self and for other; exonyms and autonyms do not always correspond, with outsiders’ names for self often reproducing implicit or even quite explicit derogatory speech (Proschan 1997:91). We found a variation on this pattern: speakers were most systematic in labeling their own group and used autonyms consistently. It was the exonyms that allowed for more variability, particularly regarding the two social groups that have experienced the most dramatic shifts in labeling, the Lebanese-Americans and the African-Americans.

Legal nomenclature for migrants from the Ottoman Empire varied widely until 1899 when immigration officials began employing the label “Syrian” (Hooglund 1987a:3). The vast majority of these migrants were Christian. Consonant with Ottoman practice, residents of this multiethnic empire self-identified according to religious affiliation, and “Syrian” became the preferred autonym for immigrants of this background, who used it to designate a “speaker of Arabic who was not a Muslim but a follower of one of the ancient Syrian Christian churches that still existed in the Near East” (Hooglund 1987b:88). “Syrians” became “Lebanese” after Lebanon’s indepen-

dence in 1946. Lebanese interlocutors often pointed this out to us. One man explained, "They called us 'Syrians,' but that was inaccurate." Others told us: "They didn't call us 'Lebanese,' they called us 'Syrian.' They used to say this was a 'Syrian Town.' 'Goin' on down to the 'Syrian Town,' but we weren't Syrians." "Yeah they used to call us 'Syrian Town'. We're not Syrians." "Everybody said that's where the 'Syrians' lived. That's how we knew it as. Never said 'Lebanese,' it was always 'Syrians.'"

Labels used to denote the Black population followed a similar patterning. The changing labels for African-Americans over the past several centuries (from "African," and "free" vs. "slave," to "colored," "Negro," "Black" and "African-American") is a topic of considerable research, and many scholars have explored the political dimensions of ethnonym choice, the coexistence of competing terms, and the changing patterns in in-group and out-group usage (Baugh 1991; Fairchild 1985; Smitherman 1991; Thornton, Taylor, and Brown 2000). As labels came to index negative stereotypes, new labels were promoted by Black elite, as in 1988 when Reverend Jesse Jackson publically fostered the term "African American" (Baugh 1991:133; Smitherman 1991:118–124). The arrival of new ethnonyms does not always mean the systematic extinction of old terms, however. One of John Baugh's informants reported to him that Blacks are clear about which terms they believe are negative; positive terms are more dynamic and take time to enter the vernacular (1991:133). While our Black interlocutors consistently employed "Black," we heard a series of terms from the non-Black narrators, including "colored," "Afro-American," "African-American," and "Black."

Inversely, non-Lebanese interviewees sometimes seemed confused when selecting a label for the Lebanese. Rosie, a Black woman in her seventies, switched back and forth between the Lebanese and Syrian titles, perhaps as a strategy of inclusion, and in our experience, her fluency only faltered at these moments: "they demolished that that Lebanese neighborhood, that one Syrian Lebanese neighborhood where their church was and everybody there." On another occasion, she reported, "He used to make up special orders of medicines for us Black people and for Syrians and for Lebanese." Jerry was more aware of the distinction between autonym and exonym: "When I was a kid they used to call this 'Syrian Town,' but there were no Syrians around here. They were Lebanese. Now why it got called 'Syrian Town,' I don't know."

We rarely heard "White" used as exonym or autonym. No people claimed this identity for themselves, and we only heard the term three times in dozens of hours of taped and casual interviews, and each time by Black speakers. A Black woman used it when asking us if we had encountered one of her classmates from elementary school: "My little White friend, Freddy T., I'm still trying to find him." Jerry used it when discussing a beach that was later segregated: "There was a beach there that was where all Black people went and there was White people went with us." The only other usage of "White" occurred in reference to a certain prostitution ring in the city, identified as "White slavery."

Finally, only a few individuals were not attached to an overt ethnic label. All of these individuals, in our view, appeared to be White, and would probably be classified as members of an unmarked "American" group. We will return to this example when we discuss a normative notion of whiteness that the labels also index.

The Semiotics of Ethnic Mentions: From Race to Ethnicity to "Nationality"

Ethnonymic usage presupposed a social world in which people could be sorted unproblematically into discrete "types." We would now like to consider what other social information is communicated by this usage, and to what degree it engages in processes of racialization.

One might assume that presenting peoples as members of clear-cut, inherited categories is racializing, especially since one of the "types" is Black. Moreover, this pattern follows two of the four projects of White racist culture that Jane Hill identifies

for the twenty-first-century United States: the creation of a taxonomy of human types, and the assignment of individuals and groups to these types (2008:20). However, we never heard anyone rank or organize these categories into a hierarchy, a third element of Hill's model, and an important component of most definitions of race. As Dick and Wirtz assert, race marks some people as fundamentally and irredeemably dangerous and Other (2011:4; see also Urciuoli 1996). The lack of a hierarchizing tendency and the fact that speakers stressed a sense of community among neighborhood residents suggest that we will want to avoid imposing the scholarly category of "race" onto this nomenclature.

In addition, speakers did not seem to be commenting on the qualities of the people marked in this way, unlike the "evaluative narratives" documented by De Fina (2000). These were not stories about the putative qualities of "Lebaneseness," for instance. But certainly these terms were not meaningless. We can safely say that this ethnonymic usage indicates a "continuous dichotomization," the persistence of boundaries between the social groups so identified (Barth 1969:14). In a Barthian approach to ethnicity, it is the existence of the labels themselves rather than differences in the behaviors of the people so defined that demonstrates the presence of ethnic groups (1969:29).

Because ethnicities exist in systems and salient identities may range in any one setting beyond what in the literature is termed "ethnic" to include or blur into other distinctions and social institutions such as "kinship, clanship, and perhaps even nationality" (Galaty 1982:2; see also Beissinger 2001), analysis must start with local usage, "grounded in indigenously meaningful categories of social classification" (Galaty 1982:2). While we rarely heard the term "ethnicity,"⁸ our interviewees sometimes used the term "ethnic," especially as a label for the neighborhood as a whole, as when Gloria was talking about it in contrast to other parts of town. But it was the term "nationality" that was used the most often in connection to the neighborhood's different types. These "ethnic" peoples had a "nationality," and our speakers employed this term in a fashion that was quite similar to contemporary scholarly usage of "ethnicity," to designate ethnic background or descent. For instance, at the climax of the chaotic Greek discussion, one of the women shouted, "What was her nationality, was she Greek!?" On another occasion, Jerry stated, "That was a melting pot. Everything, everybody, all *nationalities* went to Thomas School." Another speaker discussed the "mix of personalities, *nationalities* at Thomas School." While on a few occasions people used "nationality" to denote people of foreign national origins, this was rare.

Interestingly, the terms used to divide the neighborhood into subgroups, "Lebanese," "German," "Italian," and so forth, are also decidedly ambiguous. In using "Lebanese" rather than "Lebanese-American," speakers employ a usage that is simultaneously divisive and unifying. While it distinguishes "nationalities" from each other, it does not distinguish American citizens from non-Americans, or second- from first-generation immigrants. Boundaries between these groups are blurred, with parents and children, grandparents and recent arrivals united under a single term. This blurring could be viewed as purposefully inclusive: "Yes, some of us are citizens and some are not, but we are all the same," it seems to be arguing. A similar point could be made regarding the local use of the term "nationality." By employing a fuzzy category that decidedly does not refer to the referent's legal or citizenship status, and which does not clearly identify the grounds on which distinctions are being made, newer arrivals and the earlier immigrants are lumped together with the same ethnonym and are viewed as equivalent to other kinds of groups (religious, as in "Jews" and racial groups as in "Whites" and "Blacks"). In sum, "Syrian Town" in our narratives comprised a distinct "community"; this was where the "ethnics" lived, the "Lebanese," "Blacks," "Jews," "Italians," "Greeks," "Germans," and "Irish." In this integrated, mixed community, everyone had their "nationality." Knowing who was which type was essential for locating individuals back in time, back into the prior social space, and thus in recreating the neighborhood in peoples' minds.⁹

“Looking Down on ‘Syrian Town’”

In their discussion of semiotic processes of identification, Bucholtz and Hall write that “just as important as understanding *how* identities are formed is understanding *why* they are formed, the purpose for which particular semiotic processes are put to use” (2004:382). We now want to turn from labels’ referential meanings to their indexical significance. The interactional relevance of our data was both to speak to us, the researchers of the old neighborhood, and also to one another, as neighbors reunited, returning to the story world: the “Syrian Town” of the past. In this context, the functioning of ethnicity *was* the argumentative point, made both directly and indirectly by our interviewees. Directly, they described the integrated nature of the place at that time. Indirectly, as seen in the vignettes above, they expressed the story world’s integration affectively, seamlessly reaching across ethnic “boundaries” in their behavior toward one another and using ethnic labels naturally as they described life in the past. The neighborhood as described by our speakers was populated by diverse “ethnic peoples,” a diversity indexically presupposed by the labels themselves. Thus, in our example, ethnic labels model a certain kind of place, a specific neighborhood understood to be both diverse and integrated.

This place was also understood to be composed of hard-working families of modest means. The question of “Syrian Town’s” economic standing in relation to other neighborhoods was sometimes discussed in a cryptic fashion, perhaps a legacy of the renewal era. For instance, one man stated, “Those homes on that side were a little older, but it wasn’t that they were slum areas, they were just . . . they could have seen some improvement . . . It wasn’t like a real ritzy area . . . it wasn’t the Taj Mahal . . . it was a working person’s area.” Because our speakers were aware of the “blight” designation used by city elites to justify the demolition of their part of town, they often spoke vociferously against it, and tended to emphasize the positive qualities of the neighborhood’s structures (Smith and Scarpato 2010:140). Many of the families in this area owned their own homes, however small. This was especially the case of long-standing Lebanese and Italian families, many of whom operated small shops such as bakeries or grocery stores at the bottom floor. But those without independent businesses often worked at local factories, including steel mills, silk mills and garment factories. And all admitted that their families struggled.

Poverty emerged as an important theme in Larry’s reminiscences. During another monologue with Allison, he discussed at length how his family used to buy live chickens from a neighbor down the street, adding how they ate a lot of chicken and a lot of macaroni. His wife Dot interrupted, perhaps to explain the point of his discussion to the younger woman interviewing them:

Larry: We had lots of macaroni and lots of chicken.

Dot: They were poor.

Larry: Oh yeah, we were very poor. We didn’t . . . our area, the area down in that area, which is now a nice area, it, it was uh a fairly poor section. We didn’t have sewers in that area until the fifties, the 1950s. We had an outhouse until the 1950s. We didn’t have central heat until the.. oh, I went into the service in 1956 and I think it was around that time that we got central heat.

Larry’s father died when he was two and he grew up with a stepsister, his mother and grandmother. He explained, “So I was the only man in the house. And I had to take care of everything, you know, like, so, I grew up very young.” Pam had a similar story: her mother left the family when she was 13: “And my mother left, and my father raised us, and I was the lady of the house at 13, and I had to cook, clean, take care of my brothers, while my father worked.” A central point in her interview was her insistence on staying in school while it was expected that she would leave school to work in the factories like her friends.

Poverty also emerged when former residents were talking together in smaller group settings, as during regular meetings of the elementary school organizing

committee. One woman laughed remembering when the elementary school photographer commented on her wearing the same dress every year for her school portrait. Two men reminisced about how they would make their own football out of newspaper and string. Men talked about putting cardboard in their shoes for insulation in the winter, and all remembered the long hours their parents worked. During a discussion with an elderly Lebanese woman, Ellen, and her daughter Bea, Bea prompted her mother to talk about the Great Depression. Ellen replied, "No, they didn't lose anything [during the Depression] because they didn't really have anything to lose. . . . Our people did not get hurt by the Depression." These patterns shed light on an alternative mode of differentiation being asserted, one rooted in class, which was inscribed in the cityscape. People's reminiscences were imbued with an understanding that their neighborhood's ethnic diversity was deeply tied to its place in a wider class hierarchy, one that situated them in an inferior status to people living elsewhere.

"Syrian Town," then, was understood in relation to other locales. In this regard, it is useful to consider "adequation" and "distinction," two "tactics of intersubjectivity" proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2004:382). Adequation is the "pursuit of socially recognized sameness" (2004:383), and can help construct unity, however temporary, while distinction is a mechanism "whereby salient difference is produced" (2004:384). We can see the process of adequation at work in the lumping together of individuals of different citizenship statuses with the truncated ethnonyms ("Lebanese" and so forth). We also believe that adequation results from the vernacular use of "nationality" which allows "Blacks," "Jews," "Lebanese," and "Italians" be considered equivalent types of people.

Distinction is at work in these narratives as well. Alongside the explicit narrative of diversity in "Syrian Town," our interviewees told a story of a deeper class hierarchy dividing the city. They especially distinguished their "ethnic" neighborhood culturally and economically from the wealthy, "non-ethnic" "College Hill," a neighborhood located on a steep hill overlooking the downtown area and long-standing home of city elites. Deixis becomes the key to understanding the way these divisions are communicated in their stories. We could argue that when former residents talked together about "Syrian Town," they operated from a shared "deictic center." In her work on Mt. Pleasant, a neighborhood of Washington, DC, Gabriella Modan defines a "deictic center" as a "base point where a speaker locates themselves spatially, temporally, and socially" (2007:148). She considers the rhetorical strategies used in a grant proposal to "set up a rigid distinction between core and marginal members of the community" (2007:148). In the "Syrian Town" story world, it was clear that the "we" in the narratives were residents of "Syrian Town," who were often opposed to a more distant, abstract "they" located spatially in "College Hill." Note the way Anthony, an older Lebanese man who had tried to prevent renewal, outlines the villains of his story. Over the course of a long monologue in which the octogenarian discussed his memories of the renewal era, he said, "the powers that be that were in power . . . *they'd* destroy any foreign neighborhood . . . *they* looked down on nationalities." It is implied here that the "they" in question was of an unmarked ethnic background, since they "looked down on" "nationalities."

We find reference to a similar distant population in our interview with Gloria. We asked if the neighborhood also had people of German background:

A1: Were there any, like, German background, like Pennsylvania Dutch families?

Gloria: Well, if there was, it wasn't that many that I . . . [trails off]

A1: At your school?

Gloria: Oh, the Lebanese, the Italians, and the Blacks would *overrun* any of that. And I guess because there was *all those ethnic groups* at Thomas School, that maybe there were *some people* who looked *down upon* that, you know?

Gloria doesn't identify who "some people" are, but we sense their distance from her: they were looking *down on* her. In another conversation, she told us she imagined that local elites viewed the neighborhood as "all those ethnic peoples *down* there." In both

cases, Gloria is imagining people living above her, indexing in a parsimonious fashion both higher class status and an elevated physical location. She imagines this unnamed population considering neighborhood residents as “those ethnic peoples,” and thus we can infer that “they” are of unmarked ethnicity. Sometimes this elevated location is spelled out directly. In another part of the conversation, we discussed whether or not everyone’s stories of yesteryear would be the same. Gloria replied quickly, “Let me tell you this: if you interviewed someone who lived on College Hill, you would get a different opinion of what I’ve just told you. College Hill people kind of look *down upon* Lehigh Street.” She went on to add, “It was a really nice place to grow up, nice area to grow up. Cause you got the *mixture*. Maybe if today people could understand one another’s . . . *ethnic people*, maybe it’d be a nicer life, a nicer world.” We see here the “mixture” and “ethnic people” contrasted with a “College Hill” perspective on the neighborhood.

In another part of our interview, Gloria told a story of a specific resident from College Hill, her landlord, coming by in a chauffeured car to collect the rent:

Gloria: I can’t remember the name of the man that owned them [talking about the little houses she and her extended family lived in], but I can picture him coming, not really a limousine, but a nice big car, chauffer driven, and he’d collect the rent from everybody.

A2: Wow, huh!

A1: It’s really interesting. Yeah, I wonder who it was.

Gloria: I don’t know. He was from College Hill, cause College Hill was where all the um . . . the dignitaries or whatever . . . [trails off].

We can see in these discussions the construction of a deictic center that includes the neighborhood and its residents, and an imagined peripheral location and people described as elites located “above,” who looked “down upon” “Syrian Town.” Ethnic diversity is linked to class standing, and distinguishes “Syrian Town” from the unmarked, “non-ethnic,” elite neighborhood to the north. Even “Syrian Town’s” micro-segregation was viewed as nominal in comparison to that dividing the city as a whole. When we asked if there was hidden segregation in Easton, referring to the block-level segregation in “Syrian Town,” Jerry misunderstood and replied, “Yes, the only Black people up on College Hill were the domestics. They went up on College Hill to cook for them, took care of their kids, but couldn’t live up there.”¹⁰

Ethnic labels directly indexed common membership in the same neighborhood,¹¹ and indirectly indexed social class. Rather than participating in a covert “racialization,” as we see in Wortham et al.’s (2011) discussion of ethnic mentions, we find “classification.” Ethnic labels help to describe a certain kind of place populated by a certain kind of people, and become virtually obligatory for the former neighborhood residents, for whom they served as a covert membership card. Claiming one of “Syrian Town’s” ethnic labels (as in “I’m Lebanese”) could be viewed as taking a particular stance (see Hill 2008:143): in this case, an authentic connection to the former neighborhood. Because the neighborhood’s residents, as “ethnics,” were understood to be poor relative to the rest of the city, the ethnic labels indirectly index a working-class background, calling to mind a deeper division mapped onto the city’s very landscape.

The Exception that Proves the Rule

Embedded within these narratives are details suggesting a specific construction of whiteness associated with “College Hill.” As a usually unmarked term, “White” stands “opposite and unequal” to surrounding terms, and takes “its meaning from those surrounding categories to which it is structurally opposed” (Trechter and Bucholtz 2001:16). In contrast to the “ethnic,” poor “Syrian Town” area, “College Hill” is “non-ethnic,” rich, and elite. We can infer that the prevailing “tropes of whiteness” associated with this opposing neighborhood, from the perspective of our speakers, were “white as privileged upper class,” “white as elite” (Trechter and

Bucholtz 2001). We see this with Gloria's description of her landlords being driven down to collect their rent as "dignitaries," and Anthony's discussion of an elite group that "looked down on nationalities." As with the Lakhota narrators in Sarah Trechter's study (2001:30), whiteness "intrudes" on the neighbors' narratives, and the people we were interviewing defined themselves in clear opposition to this largely unmarked, White population.

The association between neighborhood residence, ethnic labeling, and working class status became problematic for a former resident in our group from German-English ancestry, at least on one occasion when we queried her directly on how she would identify herself. Gloria had married a Sicilian man and talked to us about having mostly Italian and Lebanese friends growing up. During the end of our interview, we interrupted to ask how she would describe herself:

- A1: And when you were talking about everybody, the Italians and the Lebanese, how would you define yourself when you were that age? Would you say you were American?
- A2: That's a question I had too.
- Gloria: Know what? I never gave it a thought! I guess I would say I'm an American, but I don't think I ever-
- A1: Would they call you English or something?
- Gloria: I don't know what they would call me!

While her hedging may be representative of the difficulty White people have in seeing their whiteness (Frankenburg 1993; Modan 2001), it seemed to us that it also underscored her confusion at confronting her own lack of a suitable ethnic label. At the same time, she didn't elicit the label "White" for herself. We wondered if local class-linked understandings of whiteness, a whiteness associated with "dignitaries," prevented her from placing herself in that category.

"Syrian Town": A Racialized Place?

Although we have argued that former residents of "Syrian Town" do not racialize the area by invoking ethnicity, interviews with non-residents and archival research suggests that prior to its demolition, the former Lebanese neighborhood had been racialized by city elites. John Hartigan points out that "racial identities are constitutive of place," adding that the racial designations of places are often gross simplifications: "neighborhoods are considered—by insiders and outsiders—to be "white" or "Black" according to shifting criteria, but the designation almost always masks the inevitable degrees of racial heterogeneity in any one location" (1999:14). Clearly the misnomer, "Syrian Town," indicates that this was understood as the part of town where "Syrians" (i.e., Lebanese) lived, a label that masked the neighborhood's actual racial and ethnic diversity.

Were Lebanese racialized? Our example presents an interesting corrective to the dominant European-immigrant-to-white narrative of the evolution of whiteness, for no matter how they are described, Lebanese were not from Europe. Moreover, while legally re-defined as "White" by a 1915 court case (Gualtieri 2001), there is evidence that anti-Syrian/Lebanese discrimination along racial grounds persisted across the nation for several more decades (Gualtieri 2001, 2004; Shadid 1927:47). The only record of official concern in Easton dated to 1916 (Smith and Scarpato 2010:133), however, alongside its "Syrian Town" appellation, we found further evidence that its Lebaneseness was viewed as "other" by some residents. Daniel, of German ancestry who grew up in another part of the city and who held his first teaching job at the Thomas School, told us, "I felt some trepidation when I first went there. I was not familiar with that socioeconomic group." Later in the same conversation, we asked how outsiders saw the neighborhood; he replied, "I had some trepidations. They were Syrians." We note his conflation of ethnic difference with "socioeconomic group," and it was clear from his tone that he had viewed this population as unusual, marked, and perhaps even dangerous.

By the time the city elites targeted this neighborhood for removal some half century later, suburban developments were well under way and the neighborhood was quite diverse, composed of almost equal percentages of Blacks, Italians, and other Americans (20 percent Lebanese, 25 percent Italian, 30 percent Black, and 25 percent Irish, Greek, Pennsylvania Dutch and Anglo-Americans; for methodology Smith and Scarpato 2010:131). In many ways, the Lebanese were not following the typical pattern of white flight to the suburbs by remaining rooted in the urban center. We may never know if it was the neighborhood's "Syrianness," its Black residents, poverty, or diversity that most attracted the attention of renewal advocates. Certainly the increase in its Black residents raised the awareness of the consultants helping write the city's renewal plans. While in 1960, Blacks comprised 4.0 percent of Easton's population (a fourfold increase from one percent in 1950), they were unevenly distributed, and "Syrian Town" exhibited the highest concentration of Black residents by far (Minorities Report:3). There is also evidence that officials found the intimacy with which Lebanese, Blacks and others lived in "Syrian Town" problematic. When a member of the Easton Redevelopment Authority was asked by the president of the NAACP about the neighborhood's integrated nature, he responded in a letter printed in the local newspaper, "although I feel that diversity of national origins, beliefs and cultures is an enrichment of American life, it hardly seems a healthy influence as it exists in the Lehigh-Washington Street section," adding that he hoped through renewal to achieve "an attractive urban environment."¹² When we talked about the former neighborhood with a former mayor, he described it as an "abject slum," adding that "The Lehigh-Washington Street project was quite controversial because that happened to be the area where most of the Lebanese immigrants lived. And many of them were well-to-do, and they did not have to live in the . . . you know, an area like that." The word we felt he was searching for but did not say was "slum" or "ghetto." What he seemed to be implying is that the Lebanese should not have stayed on living with Blacks in the city center.

Breaking the Chain of Indexicality

Modan's work reveals an entire web of indexicality operating in Mt. Pleasant (2007). She notes that community members discuss the city and suburb through a set of ideological contrasts such as heterogeneous vs. homogenous, disorderly vs. orderly, dangerous vs. safe, allowing "social actors to use any of these characteristics to index any of the others, or to index urban or suburban identity" (2007:106-7). In this way, "Whiteness can be used to index fear, fear can be used to index gender . . . and any of these can be—and are—used by community members to index a suburban identity that is juxtaposed to the city," which is in turn associated with filth, noise, masculinity and so forth (2007:106-7).

In our previous work, we found that "blight" was associated locally with "slum," which in turn was closely associated with Black people. Through this indexical chain, "blight" and "slum" were code words for race (Smith and Scarpato 2010:159). This association of African-Americans with blight emerged nationally by the beginning of the twentieth century as real estate agents, brokers, and mortgage bankers believed that Black presence would undermine property values and lead to deterioration (Gotham 2000:301). Rather than trying to identify neighborhoods where the buildings were in need of repair, they created a short-cut, perhaps finding it easier to count the number of "minorities" in a given location, and builders, developers and appraisal firms closely analyzed racial migration trends (Gotham 2000:301). One could argue that they were mistaking a relationship of correlation with causation. Taken up by federal agencies, racially discriminatory policies such as redlining were developed in which mixed or Black-majority neighborhoods automatically received less funding, setting into play an overt racial discrimination that would have long-standing consequences.¹³ To identify poor neighborhoods, officials just had to look for Black people rather than decaying structures.

In the case of "Syrian Town," this logic did not hold. Here, the majority of the structures were in decent shape and this was also where most Black people lived in the city. In fact, many of the Black families we interviewed or that people talked about were home-owners before demolition began. In discussing the neighborhood at their reunions and in our interviews, our interlocutors seem to be challenging the dominant indexical chain (blight - slum - Blacks), and instead assert what Blommaert has termed "local indexicality" (2004:11). "We were different," their narratives tell us. "Blacks lived here, among others, but we were not living in slums; we were not blighted." Their insistence that "Syrian Town" had been composed of distinct "nationalities" (and not just "Syrians") and their de-emphasis of racializing language could be viewed in the same light. We might also see their engagement with processes of "adequation" in stories of ethnic harmony as part of a wider challenge to the dominant indexical chain of associations, associations which had led to real material consequences for their neighborhood and its residents.

Renewal's Aftermath in Easton

We would now like to consider the question of stance and the purpose of these stories when viewed within the contemporary context. For, while they talked to us about life a half-century ago, our speakers are of course living in the twenty-first century and thus are aware of contemporary understandings of race and the national models of personhood that circulate through the media and shape so much of public understanding. Moreover, a Black/White binary has solidified in Easton, accelerated by the very renewal projects that eradicated "Syrian Town." Mass evictions of the late 1960s and early 1970s led to a major reordering of the social landscape as "Syrian Town's" neighbors were sorted or sorted themselves largely along racial lines. According to our informants, some Lebanese and Italian families found new homes uptown, but the majority moved to rapidly growing suburbs in surrounding townships, and we were able to corroborate these impressions with data from later Polk's City Directories (1965; 1970). Due to the housing discrimination at the time, most people of darker skin tones moved (often several times) to crowded sites in the city center, or to the South Side of town, on the other side of the Lehigh River, as members of the NAACP had predicted (Smith and Scarpato 2010:158; Minorities Report 1965:2,9).

It is in the context of the contemporary social order, then, that ethnonym-inflected narratives of everyday life in Syrian Town are "reportable" (Labov 1972:370); they are describing something worth telling. In discussing this former place and time, our speakers seemed to be making evaluative statements about the present setting, creatively constructing the contemporary world as homogeneous and other. Certainly our interviewees contrasted the ethnic diversity they had experienced with the lack of diversity in their communities today. We can see this in Gloria's discussion when she said, "It was a really nice place to grow up, nice area to grow up. Cause you got the mixture. Maybe if today people could understand one another's . . . ethnic people, maybe it'd be a nicer life, a nicer world." She seems to be associating the positive qualities of the neighborhood with the ethnic mixture itself, and suggests that the world could be a nicer place if the understanding she gained from such an upbringing was more widespread.

Interviewees also recognized that the people who populated their recollections challenged today's stereotypes associated with the same social categories. Some "non-Black" speakers felt the need to qualify their stories even while telling them. Sometimes when they talked to us about "Blacks," they seemed to feel the need to contend with the specter of a contemporary Black stereotype in order to communicate effectively about the past, and they interrupted their own stories to comment on the gap between the meaning of that social category in the past and today. We wondered if this was in part a response to the all-White interview team and find it interesting that these asides only occurred during private interviews. For instance, Anne stopped herself to explain that the Black subjects of her story were "not like the Afro-

Americans that you see now and stuff like that. They were like highclass." She also commented on the superior quality of the homes owned by her Black neighbors on several occasions. When we interviewed Mark and Jerry, Black men in their eighties, they too contrasted today's violence with the harmony of the past. After hearing the former mayor describe the neighborhood as ridden with social ills, we asked Mark if he thought that it had been associated with criminality. His response was quick: "No way, no way," adding with laughter, "Maybe a few kids who were mischievous stole some cupcakes or something." During a different conversation, a woman named Jennifer explained, "People say that the Blacks today can't get along with anyone, but things were different then." By articulating the peaceful relationship between "Syrian Town" residents, including Blacks, the interviewees reinforced the image of the tight-knit community they had lived in. Any tensions surrounding the label "Black" did not seem to come from within the neighborhood, but rather from changing political implications of the term since the neighborhood's demolition.

Concluding Remarks

Much of the scholarship on the emergence of a Black/White racial binary has developed (with good reason) from empirical studies of more racially polarized of American cities, or from macro-level analyses that can obscure the complexities of peoples' ways of identifying themselves and others. In his landmark work on racial inequality in postwar Detroit, for instance, Sugrue (1996) argues that the principle cleavages in the city were racial ones, and he describes the history of residential, occupational, and educational segregation that polarized the city and involved so many violent conflicts. Although the city's white population was ethnically quite diverse, he deemphasizes ethnicity, writing that "by the 1920s, the city's tightly knit ethnic clusters had begun to disperse" and a "dwindling number of Detroit residents found themselves living in communities defined by ethnicity" (1996:22). As a result, he adds, "residents of Detroit's white neighborhoods abandoned their ethnic affiliations and found a new identity in their whiteness" (1996:22). In his study of the neighborhood associations that proliferated after 1943, archival sources "seldom referred to national heritage or religious background" (1996:211); instead, he finds that ethnic nomenclature was reserved for "the colored," "Asians," or "Jews." Neighborhood and homeowners groups "shared a common bond of whiteness and Americanness," referring to themselves as the "white race" (1996:212). While studies based on other cities may fine-tune the timing of the emergence of a consolidated white identity (Bourgeois 1989:122; Guglielmo 2003:169; Hirsch 2004; Kazal 2004:81), most works leave the racializing trajectory in place.

The speech patterns of our elderly interviewees challenge these trends. Not only were ethnic labels relevant in the 1960s (and continue to be so today), but we also encountered very little racial "binary-making" language and rarely heard the term "White." It appears that the "Italians" and "Lebanese" living in this particular part of town were not actively involved in claiming a white racial identity, as Sugrue found in Detroit. The more important distinctions fell along class, not racial, lines.

A study of ethnonymic systems can yield important insights into local understandings of the social world. In the present example, this method has allowed us to develop a "folk" or vernacular approach to race and ethnicity prominent in the 1960s in one neighborhood of a small city, a folk model that does not exactly map onto standard academic definitions. People in this neighborhood saw each other as members of distinct "nationalities," which in the local vernacular was an unproblematic quality tied to an individual's ancestry and denoted by a liberal use of ethnonyms. We could argue that "nationality," like "race" and "ethnicity" in other settings, can function as a "strategically deployable shifter" (Dick and Wirtz 2011:E4; see also Silverstein 1976, Urciuoli 2008). At the same time, interviewees talked about each other as members of a single community that stood in opposition to the elites of College Hill. Ethnonyms in this neighborhood were thus obligatory markers, not only

of ethnic distinctions, but also of an often unstated class status. The deeper and more significant social division in this town, from the point of view of our speakers, was between the “ethnic people” and the unmarked (White) elites living “above” them. The ethnonymic labeling of the social world, then, alerts us to a covert construction of whiteness, a whiteness indicative of wealth, power and privilege, and devoid of ethnic attachments. By indirectly indexing this unmarked, covert construction of whiteness, ethnonyms helped to communicate the fusion of ethnic diversity, class, and place in a city which, at least until renewal struck its core, was most sharply divided along these lines. These statements carried with them an implicit judgment about the contemporary social order, an order that is the direct result of the processes that destroyed “Syrian Town.” Here, we suggest that the labels make the narratives “reportable” in that they describe a circumstance that is relatedly rare, and thus indirectly conjure up their opposite, the contemporary city divided along racial lines.

Our findings indicate the potential of fine-grained, language-centered ethnographic study to advance our understandings of ethnoracial identities and their evolution in different U.S. locations. They also suggest the contingent nature of the “Black-White” binary and the need for more fine-grained research into ethnic and other attachments. As Modan writes, a “Black-White binary explains interethnic dynamics in many U.S. contexts . . . but risks an analytical compression of ethnic relations that obscures local processes of ethnic categorization” (2001:119).

Our research also suggests that locations will have their own unique reactions to national trends and that geography matters in racial identity development. For these reasons, it is important to continue to investigate those areas described as mixed by their residents, in both contemporary and historical contexts, not only to advance our understanding, but also to construct a space for non-racist identity construction, White or otherwise. As Hartigan has written, public discourses on race with “mind-numbing redundancy” highlight scenes of intergroup conflict to the exclusion of non-conflictual interactions (1997:495). Not only do we need to consider examples from less polarized regions of the country, but we also need to reconsider the development of whiteness among populations often overlooked, such as the Lebanese. In such studies, it will be important to attend to the complex ways that ethnic attachments and understandings of race may be integrally linked to class. Linguistically and ethnographically grounded explorations of the ways in which people imagine and talk about their social worlds allow us to expose the sometimes concealed understandings of social divisions, with whole categories that remain unspoken, unmarked, and thus perhaps especially powerful determinants of social life.

Transcription Conventions

.	Pause. Length indicated by number of colons
<u>word</u>	Underlined words indicate stress and/or increase in volume
<i>word</i>	Italics indicate emphasis added
[word]	Brackets indicate additional information added by authors
word-	Hyphens indicate cutoffs

Notes

1. We use “Black” to designate African-Americans in this community as this is the autonym employed by our interviewees who self-identified in this way. We capitalize the word to symbolize its equivalence, in the discourse of our interviewees, with the other categories they use such as Lebanese, Syrian, Jewish, Albanian, Lithuanian, and so on. For consistency, we capitalize “White” and “Colored” when used as ethnonyms.

2. The destruction wrought by urban renewal in cities and towns across the country was so widespread that it is impossible to cite all relevant sources here. For an overview of this process, see Massey and Denton 1993.

3. The first urban renewal project was termed the “Lehigh-Washington Streets Project,” and it targeted the heart of neighborhood, while its successor, the “Riverside Drive Project,” removed

remaining neighborhood homes as well as a pivotal anchoring establishment, the local Lebanese church. The Lehigh-Washington Streets Project led to the demolition of 146 buildings on 13.5 acres from 1964 to 1966, displacing 83 families and 14 businesses. The Riverside Drive Project (1966–1971) led to the destruction of 173 buildings on 22 acres (Armstrong 1977).

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5. To protect the identities of our interviewees, names of specific institutions and individuals are pseudonyms.

6. For a review of recent scholarship in psychology on the malleability of traumatic memories, see Schacter 1996, chapter seven.

7. A1 and A2 designate first and second author, respectively.

8. It is probably no surprise that our speakers rarely used the term "ethnicity"; this is a relatively new term even in academic discourse, emerging in English-language dictionaries in the early 1970s (see Eriksen 2002:4).

9. This way of speaking was not limited to Easton, Pennsylvania, in the 1950s or 1960s. Errington (1987:662) notes a similar usage in Rock Creek, Montana, where "it is very difficult to avoid having an ethnic identity" and where he was frequently asked his "nationality." See also Inoue 1989:149. See Henri Diament for a decidedly prescriptive stance on popular American usage for "nouns and adjectives of nationality" (1981:197).

10. During rallies by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1963, housing was a key issue, and one of the signs depicted in Easton newspaper coverage stated, "Why Can't I Live on College Hill?" (Smith and Scarpato 2010:158).

11. The labels could be viewed as "first-order indexicals" that connect a specific way of speaking to residents of a specific location that is located below the level of conscious awareness (Silverstein 2003; Modan 2007:186 n. 3).

12. See Hugh Moore, Jr. "Letter to the Editor." Easton Express, June 12, 1963.

13. The literature on the differential impacts of federal loan and urban renewal policies from the 1930s to the present era is vast. An excellent overview can be found in Massey and Denton 1993.

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