

Yale University
Workshop in Urban Ethnography

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Abstract:

Black Identities Revealed: “New” and “Old” African Americans in Middle-Class New York

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In existing studies of the black middle class, scholars have provided important insights into how racial and class identities are negotiated by native-born blacks. However, in multiethnic and multiracial cities such as New York, the experience of being black and middle class is shaped by ethnicity, or one’s immigrant status. Using the site of Cascades, a predominately black multiethnic and middle-income neighborhood in Jamaica, Queens, New York, Ms. Clerge will discuss the role of ethnicity in the black middle-class experience. The presentation will focus on the “Boulevard,” a commercial strip where businesses and organizations such as African American and Dominican salons, Haitian and Jamaican restaurants, and Trinidadian real estate firms are a central part of daily life for local residents. Within these businesses, she argues, interesting identity work occurs between native and foreign-born blacks. Using data from interviews and observations with business and community leaders and organizations, she explains how ethnic identity, in addition to race and class, are activated and managed both as sources of cooperation or separation within this black middle-class neighborhood.