

## **Black Immigrants in the United States and the “Cultural Narratives” of Ethnicity**

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*This article argues that social science representations of post-1965 Black immigrants in the United States employ the concept of “ethnicity” in ways that reinforce the racialist myth of Black (American) cultural inferiority. Specifically, the discursive use of Black immigrant “ethnic” and “cultural distinctiveness,” while admittedly reflecting an important recognition of the heterogeneity of the United States Black populations, is in fact predicated upon a repackaged “culture of poverty” discourse that serves to reaffirm the overarching racial order. In a discussion of the theoretical and historical development of the concept, I show how the current discourse of “ethnic distinctiveness” perpetuates a form of racism under a theory that denies the relevance of race while it continuously recodes the biological notions of race as “culture.” Thus, Black immigrant distinctiveness, when presented through the prism of the cultural narratives of ethnicity, allows for the perpetuation of a “cultural racism” that adversely affects all Blacks in this country. I therefore call for a rejection of ethnicity theory as it is currently conceptualized and suggest the need to ground theories of Black distinctiveness within analyses of power relations and ongoing practices of racial subjugation.*

*Key Words: ethnicity, race, culture, cultural racism, Black immigrants, African Americans*

In race talk the move into mainstream America always means buying into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens. Whatever the ethnicity or nationality of the immigrant, his nemesis is understood to be African American. . . . It doesn't matter what shade the newcomer's skin is. A hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will be open.—Toni Morrison<sup>1</sup>

The public outrage and agitation resulting from the 4 February 1999 brutal assassination of 22-year-old Amadou Diallo by four New York police officers was extraordinary. And rightly so. The victim, an unarmed Black man from Guinea, was hit with 19 of the 41 bullets fired at him by the White officers. The shooting received extensive mainstream media coverage and nationwide attention and sparked numerous protests. According to media reports, the event “inflamed racial ten-

sions” in New York City and presumably led to a national reconsideration of police treatment of communities of color (Scherer 1999; Times Wire Services 1999). The ensuing protests (led primarily by local grassroots Black activists) demanded investigations into what was perceived as the continuous civil rights abuses of New York City police. The Black community correctly read this heinous crime as one in a long line of systematic racially motivated abuses. On the other hand, the mainstream media, while minimally acknowledging the racial character of the crime, indirectly undermined such recognition by emphasizing instead the victim’s *immigrant* status.

The media’s repeated reference to Diallo as an *African immigrant* ultimately allowed for alternative interpretations of the shooting. Indeed, for some, the Diallo shooting was clearly not a matter of “Black and White,” as some members of the Black community had asserted. It was, rather, a violation of the civil rights of an innocent immigrant who happened to be Black. Although this interpretation is hardly unique, I want to suggest that there is something much deeper influencing the differing readings of the Diallo murder. In reviewing the various reports on the matter, I cannot help but wonder if, at some point, Diallo’s “Africanness” came to be used to underscore the heinousness of the crime. More specifically, could his immigrant status have allowed him to be implicitly understood as “innocent” in contrast to the African American often assumed to be guilty of criminality?<sup>2</sup> Such a question no doubt raises a number of issues, not least of which are how Black immigrant experiences in the United States may differ from those of Black Americans, and the ways in which these experiences (and this difference) are represented.

Over the past few years, there have been a number of newspaper, magazine, and journal articles relating Black/African<sup>3</sup> immigrant successes, as compared to African American failures. In its 11 May 1996 issue, for example, the conservative *Economist* news magazine published a short piece entitled “Race in America: Black Like Me.” The article began by asking “Why do black immigrants do so much better than blacks who are born in America?” The author of the article reasoned that “Attitude makes part of the difference . . . black immigrants are more entrepreneurial than native-born blacks.” After detailing the many cultural values of Black immigrants (such as “high motivation . . . and a strong will to succeed”) and comparing their household incomes to those of native-born Blacks, the author of the article asserted, “Figures like these suggest that racism does not account for all, or even most, of the difficulties encountered by native-born blacks” (1996: 27). This *Economist* story sparked a barrage of newspaper and journal editorials across the United States speaking to the “extraordinary” achievements of the Black and African immigrant *ethnic* group. One such editorial, appearing a month later in the *Baltimore Sun*, began with the question and answer, “What is America’s most highly educated ethnic group? Hint: It ain’t Asians. Stumped? Think black. . . . As in black African immigrants” (Kane 1996). Without acknowledging the obvious selectivity of these immigrants that allow for “three-quarters [to have] some college

experience [and] one in four [to have] an advanced degree" (Kane 1996), the author instead makes a cultural argument for the perceived immigrant success. He opines that Black immigrants themselves do not think that White racism "is to blame for virtually every ill afflicting black America"<sup>4</sup> and advises African Americans to use Black/African immigrants as models of "ethnic" success. Such editorials and articles celebrating the "virtues" of Black/African immigrants have saturated newspapers and journals across the country,<sup>5</sup> making sure to highlight the cultural and behavioral differences between immigrant and United States-born Black populations. As I will show, social scientists have also participated in these projects and, indeed, their scientific expertise is often used to buttress the arguments made in these works.

It is, of course, important to recognize and appreciate the heterogeneity of the United States Black populations. What seems significant to ask, however, is in what ways are distinctions among Black populations being made, and why are such distinctions important at this sociohistorical juncture?<sup>6</sup> Moreover, who engages in such endeavors and what are the contexts within which Black particularity is recognized? I argue in this essay that the relatively new interest in acknowledging heterogeneity in the United States Black community is less an issue of appreciating Black cultural and historical diversity and difference than one of the shifting nature of racialist discourse. I contend that contemporary race and racialist discourses work through what Ruth Hsu (1996) calls the "rehabilitative concept of ethnicity." According to Hsu, the concept of ethnicity is nestled within a larger "nationalist hegemonic discourse" that is based upon a narrative trope of the "American Dream," a trope that signifies this nation as one that offers limitless opportunity for all. The ethnicity concept (and, by extension, ethnicity theory) is constituted of "cultural narratives" that are used to maintain this myth and to place immigrants (and other "ethnics") into the ideological framework of the nation. The dominant notion of ethnicity appeals to the cultural attributes of—especially immigrant—groups and presents "ethnic" group identity formation through celebratory discourses of United States multiculturalism and equality. However, this is often done without detailed attention to the forces that structure the unequal insertion of various "ethnics" in the United States racial hierarchy or, more specifically, without a discussion of the complex interplay of ethnic and racial identity formations. Thus, the narratives of ethnicity—narratives that forecast the ultimate success of all "ethnics"—function as proof that the "American Dream" works and that racial identity does not restrict the acceptance and full integration of immigrants of color into United States society (Hsu 1996; see also Bashi 1998; Bashi and McDaniel 1997).

In this article, I show that Black/African immigrant "cultural distinctiveness" (often articulated as "ethnic" difference) is increasingly being used by the media, social scientists, and liberal and conservative persons to deny the continued significance of race and racism and the special position of "blackness" in this country. Specifically, the current discourse of "ethnicity" perpetuates a form of racism

under a theory that denies the relevance of race while it continuously recodes the biological notions of race as “culture” (Blaut 1992). My primary argument is that the discursive use of Black/African immigrant “ethnic and cultural distinctiveness” is in fact predicated upon a repackaged “culture of poverty”<sup>7</sup> discourse that serves to perpetuate stereotypical understandings of United States-born Black experiences and identity formations. Because Black immigrant “cultural distinctiveness” is based on an essentialist deployment of culture and is constructed through notions of Black inferiority in general, it perpetuates anti-Black racist ideologies and practices that ironically affect all who are racialized as Black. Social scientists and laypersons often mark Black immigrants’ interpellation into this discourse of “ethnicity” as a sign of the diminishing significance of race. I contend, however, that the uneven participation of immigrants in the propagation of ethnic cultural narratives has to be understood within the context of United States racialization processes. A key aspect of these racialization processes is immigration scholars’ own construction of a racialist framework of analysis that, by its insistence on comparing the cultural value systems of native-born to foreign-born Blacks, impedes essential discussions about the complex nature of United States racism and the Black immigrant confrontation with United States racial hierarchies.

In what follows, I present a brief background of the development of ethnicity theory in the United States. I show that an important aspect of ethnicity discourse was its link to both European immigrant incorporation and the popularization of the “culture of poverty” thesis. I then explore academic representations of Black immigrants and implicate the use of the ethnicity concept in these works in the new culturalist discourse of race. Using my own experience and research with Black immigrants as a point of reference, I call for a rejection of “ethnicity” theory as it is currently conceptualized and suggest the need to ground interpretations of Black particularity within analyses of power relations and practices of subjugation (Gregory 1993).

### **Popular ethnicity theory**

The concept of ethnicity currently is ubiquitous. Like the concept of race, it is a term that is indiscriminately used without much consensus on its meaning (Malik 1996). But, unlike race, ethnicity has come to be the politically acceptable means by which social scientists describe social difference. The popularity of the ethnicity concept came at the turn of the century as scholars attempted to challenge dominant racial views and find an alternative to the biological determinism of the concept of race. Against the prevailing biological understandings of race, the effort was to establish an understanding of group formation process as a function of culture.<sup>8</sup> In short, race stood for biologically defined difference, whereas ethnicity was believed to depend upon subjective cultural difference. Ethnic groups, therefore, came to be seen as socially and culturally constituted and based primarily upon self-identification. The result, Omi and Winant (1986) argue, is that “ethnicity-

based" theory has been a dominant paradigm guiding social science research since the 1930s.

Popular ethnicity theory was largely influenced by the massive influx of European immigrants into the United States during the early part of the twentieth century. Suddenly, ideologies of "assimilation" and the "melting pot" emerged with a national concern of absorbing (or "Americanizing") the thousands of European immigrants into the "American nation." Assimilationism assumed the complete rearticulation of distinct immigrant cultures into a putatively integrated "American" society.<sup>9</sup> The belief was that Americanization would ultimately lead to the erasure of distinct European cultural and national loyalties as the United States nation became a crucible for the fusing of these historical differences into a new breed of "Americans." Later, intellectual currents would reformulate the understanding of the "melting pot" and the idea of "assimilation," advocating instead a theory of "cultural pluralism" to contend with and tolerate the perceived "ongoing ethnicity" among European immigrants and their children (Glazer and Moynihan 1963). In any case, the White European immigrant experience soon came to serve the controlling model for understanding the incorporation of all groups into United States society.<sup>10</sup> Omi and Winant (1986) label this the European "immigrant analogy" and it would guide social science research on ethnicity through to contemporary times.

The European "immigrant analogy" allowed ethnicity theorization to appeal to cultural differences without attention to persistent racial inequality in the country. Conceptions of ethnicity were predicated upon the belief in a nominally homogeneous "national identity" whereby European immigrant groups have every opportunity to shed their cultural distinctiveness and become full and equal members of this "America." Implicit in this notion of immigrant incorporation is the idea of the nation as open and inclusive, democratic and egalitarian, and welcoming of all (Hsu 1996). According to E. San Juan, Jr., ethnicity became the term used to codify the "conventional belief in the virtue of assimilation, the gradual homogenizing of diverse groups predicated on value consensus ("The American Creed") and the norm of social integration" (1992: 6). In this sense, the experiences of groups affected by continuous racial and social exclusion could not be included in analyses of ethnicity. And it was not until the urban rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s that ethnicity theory was forced to contend with race, racial difference, and racial oppression. Yet, the response to the demand for equality by oppressed people of color led to an even more problematic conception of ethnicity.

With the burgeoning of the civil rights movement, ethnicity theorization shifted to promote race/racial identity as an epiphenomenon of ethnicity, rather than acknowledging the significance of race as constitutive of United States social relations. Ignited by Glazer and Moynihan's influential book, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), there emerged a "glorification of ethnicity" where ethnicity theory stressed the expressive, subjective, and internal cultural processes of group formation (Sanjek 1994: 8). Consequently, each subordinated non-White group, however variegated,

was said to be *one* ethnic group among others, with equal opportunities, like earlier groups of European immigrants, to work its way up the social ladder (Sanjek 1994: 8).<sup>11</sup> E. San Juan, Jr. (1992: 32), critiques the “pseudouniversalism” of ethnic identity, asserting:

The absurd logic of the ethnicity school [of] making everyone ethnics of one sort or another, can be understood as one impelled by the charitable desire to negate racial differences which have served to ground the hierarchies of the de facto American political structure.

Indeed, the homogenizing of ethnic identity processes significantly erases the structural and historical differences between subordinated racial groups and Euro-Americans. Although European migration in the early 1900s was by no means completely voluntary, it does not compare to the forced migration through military conquest, violent enslavement, and the continued subjugation of most people of color.<sup>12</sup> The celebration of ethnicity blurred these crucial differences and obviously entailed a blindness to both structural racism and the reality that “ethnic” identity is circumscribed within processes of racial formation. In fact, the project of ethnicity, based on the European model of “assimilation,” ultimately worked in conjunction with the United States racial hierarchy. Alexander Saxton explains that:

the United States actually did absorb a variety of cultural differences among European migrants at the same time that it was erecting a white supremacist social structure. Moderately tolerant of European *ethnic* diversity, the nation remained adamantly intolerant of *racial* diversity (Saxton 1977: 145–146 as quoted in San Juan 1992: 33, italics in original).<sup>13</sup>

In effect, the ability of European immigrants to become incorporated into United States society was directly linked to their ability to “become White” (or assert whiteness) in a White supremacist society (Allen 1994; Ignatiev 1995; Lipsitz 1998; Roediger 1991; Brodtkin 1999).<sup>14</sup> This point effectively demonstrates the significance of race and racialization processes in United States society. Becoming “white” entailed a subsuming of European “ethnic” identity for the privilege of a racial one. Thus, as Leland Saito has observed, the acknowledgement, by scholars, of real or symbolic ethnicity among European immigrants and their descendants often disguises the ways in which whiteness (and White racial privilege) permeates society (1998; see also Lipsitz 1998).

Nevertheless, scholarship on ethnicity continued to use the model of European immigrant incorporation into United States society, but this time to discuss the *inability* of non-White groups to fully “assimilate.” Omi and Winant call this the “bootstraps model,” where the success with which an “ethnic” group is incorporated into the majority society depends upon the quality of specific cultural norms it possesses. This model finds its foundation in the classic assimilation paradigm

that presented all immigrants—at least those who possess the “correct” cultural and behavioral values—as having the potential to become full “Americans” (Bashi and McDaniel 1997). The linking of the “assimilation” discourse to the notion of immigrant “success” led to a valorization of (White) European ethnic cultural practices and the discussions of scholars soon became centered on the need for racialized non-White groups (particularly African Americans) to emulate the cultural practices of successfully incorporated European immigrants. Gunnar Myrdal, for example, popularized the assimilation model as he applied it in his famed study, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1962). Although Myrdal was aware of the role of racial discrimination in the perpetuation of the so-called “Negro problem,” he nevertheless suggested that European American behavior patterns be emulated by Blacks in order for them to better “assimilate” into United States society (Bashi and McDaniel 1997).<sup>15</sup> Implicit in this call for “assimilation,” however, was also the propensity to blame the *behavior* (and culture) of victims of the racial hierarchy for their plight. This cultural “bootstraps model” was therefore “limited by an unwillingness to consider . . . [the] special circumstances which racially defined minorities encounter in the U.S.” (Omi and Winant 1994: 22).

Omi and Winant level another powerful critique against the ethnicity paradigm, one that is crucial for our discussion of Black/African immigrants in the United States. The two condemn what they have named the “they all look alike” model of ethnicity theory and argue that

ethnicity theory isn't very interested in ethnicity among blacks. The ethnicity approach views blacks as one ethnic group among others. It does not consider national origin, religion, language, or cultural differences among blacks, as it does among whites, as sources of ethnicity. . . . There is, in fact, a subtly racist element in this substitution—in which whites are seen as variegated in terms of group identities, but blacks ‘all look alike’ (1986: 23; italics in original).

This lumping of all Blacks into one “ethnic” slot represents the imposition of a paradigm based on White “ethnic”/immigrant history on racially defined groups<sup>16</sup> and serves to obfuscate very different histories and structural constraints (San Juan 1992: 34; see also Mullings 1978). As “ethnics,” Blacks are a singular group with one recognizable set of behaviors (referred to as a “cultural practices”) that, in effect, renders them “unassimilable”.<sup>17</sup> The inability to “assimilate” into United States society and “succeed” (like other “ethnics”) is therefore blamed on Blacks’ inability to adopt the correct cultural practices (see Bashi and McDaniel 1997).

Importantly, this same “assimilationist” school of immigrant incorporation also “gave rise to studies on the ‘culture of poverty’ and a variant, the ‘ethnic family structure,’ which all tried to explain African Americans’ relative lack of social ‘progress’” (Hsu 1996: 54). Introduced originally by Oscar Lewis and later popularized by the likes of Nathan Glazer, Patrick Moynihan, and various other social scientists and policy makers, the “culture of poverty” thesis asserts that sociopolitical

and economic conditions have spawned among the urban poor a way of life—indeed, a “pathological” set of behaviors—that exists separately from the rest of “mainstream” society. This “virtually autonomous culture” that this thesis insists exists among the poor is characterized by, among others, a sense of resignation or fatalism, an inability to delay gratification and plan for the future, low educational motivation, low social and economic aspiration, a trend toward female-centered families (matrifocality), and an inadequate moral preparation for employment (Lewis 1959; Moynihan 1965; see Leacock 1971 and Valentine 1968 for a critique). The key assumption of the culture of poverty is that the behaviors and values it indexes as those of the poor have “converted their poverty into a self-perpetuating world of dependence” (Malik 1996: 202). As Robin Kelley, among others, has demonstrated, the “culture of poverty” thesis has generated an industry of scholarship on the “ghetto,” the “underclass,” and the “inner city,” all of which construct poor people of color—particularly the Black poor—as a “reservoir of pathologies and bad cultural values” (Kelley 1997: 16; see also Valentine 1968).<sup>18</sup> While the more conservative arguments of the “culture of poverty” thesis were challenged by liberal scholars from the late 1960s, many of whom insisted that Black culture was itself a necessary adaptation to racism and poverty, these same scholars nevertheless came to similar conclusions that bad environment yields bad behavior (Anderson 1990; Glasgow 1981; Wilson 1987).<sup>19</sup> One significant example is the notion that racism has allowed the development of a Black “oppositional culture” to White America (Ogbu 1978, 1990; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). This strand of the “culture of poverty” thesis acknowledges racism as a structural impediment to Black life, yet it faults a purported “oppositional culture” for the unrelenting socioeconomic and racial inequality suffered by poor working-class Blacks. Here, also, Black people’s behavior/culture is defined, not on its own terms, but always in opposition to an established norm. Most of this literature conflates behavior and culture, and treats culture as singular, reducing a wide array of complex practices to “cardboard typologies” of the urban poor (Kelley 1997: 17).

I hasten to point out the interplay of culture, race, gender, and class within the “culture of poverty” thesis. The “underclass,” by definition, almost always refers to poor people of color, particularly the Black poor. In the proliferation of “ghetto” ethnographies in poor and working-class African American neighborhoods from the late 1970s, otherwise liberal scholars employed the basic tenets of the culture of poverty thesis, stressing cultural explanations for continued poverty and imbuing them with racial meanings (see Anderson 1990; Bourgois 1995; Hannerz 1969; Liebow 1967; Rainwater 1970). Yet, scholarship with “culture of poverty” tendencies and assumptions often avoids a racist label because it uses a cultural, instead of a biological, explanation for the continued subordinated position of United States Blacks (and other people of color). This is done by grounding purported abnormal or “pathological” behavior in discussions of culture and often linking these discussions of culture to class and moral values. And, of course, underlying such discourse is a distinct element of a racialized class differentiation that marks as ideal

the purported social—and, therefore, cultural—norms and values of a White middle class. This is precisely where the ethnicity scholarship, which employs an assimilation paradigm of European immigrant incorporation into the United States, informs and is informed by scholarship that continues to propagate the tenets of the “culture of poverty” thesis. The “culture of poverty” discourse employs the same cultural narratives as ethnicity theory to propagate culturally racist ideas about (United States) Black experiences. It posits the behaviors and practices of the Black poor against an imagined set of “middle class” values that are, in the last instance, unattainable and then proceeds to construct the people as “unassimilable.” And, although this thesis has been amply critiqued over the years (see especially Valentine 1968 and also Gomez 1999; Kelley 1997; Leacock 1971; Malik 1996), it continues to resurface in contemporary lay and academic discourse through what Miguel Gomez (1999) calls the “nine lives of the ‘culture of poverty’ theory” (see, for example, Waters 1994, 1999a; D’Souza 1995; Sowell 1978; Ogbu 1978, 1990). Through it all, and even with disingenuous overtures to the existence of a separate “Black middle class” (with implied White middle-class values), those employing the culture of poverty thesis, much like those early immigration/ethnicity theorists, present culture as singular and immutable and Black peoples as an undifferentiated mass.

Against the conventional practice of homogenizing all Blacks as one ethnic group, the current move within the migration and ethnicity scholarship is to examine “Black ethnicity” and to emphasize Black cultural distinctiveness. This has occurred with the development, in migration studies, of research and scholarship on Black immigrants. Until very recently, voluntary Black immigration to the United States was not acknowledged and, often, Black immigrants suffered from what Roy Bryce-Laporte labeled “invisibility” (1972; see also Reid 1939). Contemporary social scientists, however, have begun to make visible the diverse histories, cultural practices, and experiences of United States Black populations. In the rest of this essay, I argue that, despite this new development, the social science discourse of “Black ethnicity” continues, in the tradition of “culture of poverty” thesis, to propagate culturally deterministic notions of Black identity formation that ultimately work to reinforce the negative racialization and subordination of all Blacks—immigrants and United States-born alike.

### **The “ethnicity paradigm” and Black/African immigrants**

Most of the social science interest in Black immigration came after the passage of the Hart–Cellar Immigration Reform Act of 1965, which partially abolished the quota system that gave preferences to northern European immigrants. This Act also numerically restricted immigration from North and South America as well as the Caribbean. In turn, preference was given to persons with “professional skills” from Asia and Africa (Fortney 1972). While this change in United States immigration policy drastically shifted the racial and cultural composition of immigrants,

its most significant aspect was that post-1965 arrivals were, on average, more educated and held more prestigious occupations than both earlier immigrants and other United States-born populations (Fortney 1972; Model 1997). The media focus on the “proliferation” of poor immigrants notwithstanding,<sup>20</sup> the number of incoming professional immigrants of color continued to grow and, following the passage of the 1990 Immigration Act, has increased to approximately twenty-five percent of the total yearly immigration population (Takougang 1995). African and other Black immigrants have benefited from the liberalization of United States immigration policy. As their numbers have increased almost exponentially,<sup>21</sup> they have established large and, to social scientists, conspicuous communities.

Although many were still constrained by sociological paradigms of “assimilation,” some early studies of the post-1965 wave of immigration attempted to address issues of race in the migration experience (see, for example, Foner 1987; Halter 1993; Kasinitz 1992; Laguerre 1984; Portes and Stepick 1993; Sutton and Chaney 1987; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Woldemikael 1989; Zephir 1996). This allowed the development of scholarship on Afro-Caribbean (and, later, postcolonial African) and Asian migration to the United States. What is significant about this scholarship on these recent immigrant populations, however, is the creative and revisionist use of the ethnicity paradigm.

Many of the current studies on Black migration in the United States are structured in ways that showcase Black immigrant “ethnic” identity formation as quite distinct from racial identity processes.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the growing body of scholarship on Black immigrants is almost always concerned with how they negotiate the space between race and ethnicity. These studies are disturbing, not so much for their “difference through ethnic diversity” discourse about the United States Black population, as for the way in which such difference is presented. Specifically, the focus on Black immigrant ethnicity is usually done—however inadvertently—within a “model minority” paradigm that simplistically subsumes racio-political dynamics under a potentially benign language of ethnic identity.<sup>23</sup> Such language, more often than not, is used to buttress celebrations of “multiculturalism” while retreating from directly engaging with racial inequality and the injustices it fosters (Pierre 2002). The mainstream scholarship on Black immigrant “incorporation” in United States society, moreover, works in ways that use immigrants’ purported “ethnic” identification to further a subtle, yet insidious, racialist discourse about (United States-born) Black cultural inferiority.

Significantly, the “ethnic” identity formation processes of Black immigrants are also celebrated because they *prevent* “assimilation.” The contradictions inherent in this position are astounding. Whereas European immigrant “ethnic” diversity was celebrated because it was the vehicle through which these groups would become “American,” Black immigrant ethnicity is celebrated by scholars for the opposite effect. According to a number of scholars, “assimilation” is undesirable for Black immigrants, because it means “assimilation” into Black America, a process that implies inherent downward social and cultural mobility (Alba and Nee

1997; Waters 1994; Zhou 1997). This is, indeed, a very ironic rearticulation of the European "immigrant analogy" where successful (racial and cultural) "assimilation" was viewed as synonymous with upward mobility. Without much elaboration on this contradiction, scholars move to make comparisons between Black immigrants and United States-born Blacks and attempt to demonstrate greater "success" for the "unassimilated" immigrant. Then, such disparate experiences of "success" (however defined) are attributed to "ethnic" (read: cultural/behavioral) differences between the two groups. Black immigrants, we are told, display cultural values that mark them as destined, not for "assimilation" into the United States, but for membership in a cultural pluralist (multicultural) society. And if they choose to remain "ethnic," the possibilities for "success" are endless. Consequently, we are led to believe that the subordinated African American position in United States society—particularly, United States Blacks' lack of "ethnic" identity like their Black immigrant counterparts—is a direct reflection of the pathology inherent in the group's cultural values and practices. Such discussions of both Black immigrants and African Americans strengthen rather than unpack ideologies of race. That is, the strictly defined "assimilation"<sup>24</sup> options of both groups are not interrogated within the context of the United States racial hierarchy. For example, such a conclusion about "downward assimilation" could have compelled scholars to explore the racially ascribed "assimilation" options available to Black immigrants; it could have encouraged the interrogation of other issues that inform the differing expectations of "assimilation" for Black and White immigrants, perhaps pointing to the differential outcomes of processes of racialization of different immigrant groups and complexifying discussions of identity formation.

The recent, and arguably influential, studies by Philip Kasinitz, Mary Waters, and Milton Vickerman are especially good examples of these trends in contemporary scholarship on Black immigrants. Each of their texts, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Kasinitz 1992), *Black Identities: West Indian Realities and American Dreams* (Waters 1999a), *Crosscurrents: West Indian Immigrants and Race* (Vickerman 1999), along with their other work, are paradigmatic of the categorical—and rather predictive—ways that immigrant "cultural distinctiveness" is used to both reaffirm the United States racial hierarchy and perpetuate the pathologizing of African American life and culture. Despite various claims of interrogating the complex nature of race, each of these studies instead focuses on immigrant "ethnic" identity formation. They do so in three distinct, yet interrelated, ways: 1) each author treats ethnicity and race as discrete categories, presenting ethnic identity as subjectively constructed ("self-making") and as a matter of "choice"; 2) each author describes ethnic identity as a set of behaviors (or traits) that yield unique cultural practices for immigrants; and 3) each implicitly denies *African American* ethnicity, presenting Black immigrant ethnic identity in contrast to "pathological" African American practices and behaviors. Kasinitz and Waters, for example, each argue that though the category of race is socially constructed, it nevertheless implies inherent biological differences,

while ethnicity refers to how a group *independently* defines itself in cultural terms. Waters, especially, focuses on “ethnic identity choice,” as if identity formation—of any kind—ever relied on personal will alone. And while both authors, as well as Vickerman, insist on the power of racial inequality in the United States and the relative overlap of race and ethnic categories for immigrants, they nevertheless construct their respective studies in ways that suggest otherwise. Thus, Kasinitz stresses Afro-Caribbeans’ use of ethnicity as a resource, Waters insists on framing Black immigrant identity in terms of three options (“ethnic,” “immigrant,” and “[Black] American”), and Vickerman asserts that Black immigrants evade racial categorization by carving out a separate identity. All three scholars, therefore, not only privilege the processes of Black ethnic identification, but also express this identification in terms of “choice.” In so doing, all three reduce ethnic identification to a solely subjective process, as if racialized Black immigrant ethnicity is so decoupled from race categorization and the United States racial hierarchy that it renders self-definition authoritative. The effect is a tendency not to acknowledge that racial and ethnic identity processes are mutually constitutive and that their mutual articulation is not only inevitable, but often has negative consequences for Black immigrants in the United States context.

It is in the discussion of Black immigrant ethnic identity processes—as distinct from, although admittedly complicated by, race—in the United States that Kasinitz, Waters, and Vickerman construct a narrative around group behavior and culture. Waters and Vickerman, in particular, make the case for the set of unique cultural practices imported to the United States by immigrants that renders them better able to cope with United States racial inequality. Waters, in turn, stresses that Black immigrants have cultural attributes that allow them to not only have low expectations of hostile “interpersonal race relations” with United States Whites, but also to react “more militantly” against perceived racial injustice (see, especially, 1999a). In such narratives of Black immigrant cultural distinctiveness (as compared to United States-born Black cultural practices and behaviors), we find the preservation of United States racial hierarchies through the not-so-subtle evocation of the “culture of poverty” thesis in the denigration of African American life and culture.

Mary Waters’s work especially deserves special consideration because it clearly represents the extent to which the discourse of Black/African immigrant “ethnicity” can be used to propagate the “culture of poverty” myths of (United States) Black cultural inferiority.<sup>25</sup> In her discussion of why “assimilation” should not be a viable option for Black immigrants, Waters asserts that such a move would lead young immigrants to “adopt the negative attitudes toward school, opportunity, hard work and the ‘American dream’ that their American peers have adopted. . . .” (1994: 802). Consequently, she continues, young Black immigrants that “assimilate” would internalize racism in similar ways to United States-born Blacks and look negatively towards “success”:

The American-identified youth are in fact assimilating to the American black subcul-

ture in the neighborhood. It is the American black cultural forms they are adapting to, and they do so in distinction to . . . the wider mainstream white identities. These students adopt some of the 'oppositional' poses that American black teenagers have been observed to show toward academic achievement: the idea of America, the idea of opportunity, and the wider society (Waters 1994: 811–812).

Waters does not stop there. She insists that what determines whether "Blackamericanization"<sup>26</sup> occurs in second-generation Black immigrants is the socioeconomic status (both perceived and real) of the immigrant parents of these adolescents. Thus, Waters argues that class background, the social network of parents, and family structure work together to influence Black immigrant "success." According to Waters, middle-class Black immigrant parents work to "shield children from neighborhood [Black] peer groups that espouse anti-school values." On the contrary, children in households that are headed by single immigrant women are most likely to become Blackamericanized and have "downward social mobility," act oppositionally to (White) authority, and have no motivation for success.

What is most apparent in these discussions of Black immigrant ethnic identity formation is the simultaneous stereotypical representation of African American life and culture. Indeed, Waters explicitly states, even quoting Kasinitz, that many of the problems plaguing the African American community are cultural, suggesting Black immigrant cultural superiority (see, especially, 1999a: 99).<sup>27</sup> In presenting the undesirability of immigrant "assimilation" in terms that equate it to the adoption of negative behaviors and practices of a subordinated racialized group, Waters evades questions of race and power. Here, the so-called "mainstream" (read: White) identity goes not only unproblematized, but is also set up as the correct identity to adopt. More importantly, we see the rearticulation of the "culture of poverty" thesis in Waters's representation of African Americans. Throughout her work, Waters is able to use "culture" to explain United States-born Blacks' lack of "progress." Her insistence on linking all African Americans to discussions of "poverty," the "underclass," the "ghetto," and as having an "oppositional culture" perpetuates the most vulgar stereotypes about the experiences of United States-born Blacks (Leacock 1971). According to Waters, United States-born Blacks have developed an "oppositional" attitude toward success, they (wrongly) *expect* negative "interpersonal relations" with Whites and these "ghetto inner city blacks" (1999a: 324) have families that are matrifocal; they have a culture that is not only self-defeating and self-perpetuating, but corrupting (of Black immigrants). Thus, the reality that immigrants of color are "leapfrogging over native American Blacks in achievement" (Waters 1999b: 1265) clearly implies that the problem is within the United States Black community itself, in its "values." In other words, African Americans have not learned the things they need to be treated equally to their White counterparts; they have not learned how to behave in appropriate ways, as social adults (Blaut 1992).

Through it all, African Americans are presented as an undifferentiated mass.

Even while Waters attempts, unevenly, to discuss class differentiation within the United States-born Black population, she falters in a similar fashion to early and contemporary “culture of poverty” proponents. She mentions that middle-class African Americans have value systems separate from the “ghetto blacks.” Yet, underlying this assertion, is the assumption that the Black middle class has become upwardly mobile precisely because it has rejected “ghetto” culture and has adopted American (read: White) cultural practices. The use of the Black middle class in this way, however, does nothing but bolster the “culture of poverty” discourse that uses the notion of lower (or “under”) class as a signifier for the cultural inferiority of all Blacks.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Waters’s own differentiation of African Americans is uneven as her continuous references to Black “ghetto culture” is presented as something possessed by all African Americans.

There is, in Waters’s analyses, what appears to be not only a disturbing contempt for African Americans, but also to a rudimentary understanding of African American (and *United States*) history and culture, as well as a lack of understanding of racialization processes (see Gordon 1997; Kelley 1997). Indeed, Waters presents these pejorative views of African Americans—that they do not want to “achieve,” that they do not fight racism militantly, that they have an “oppositional culture”—as if they have not been challenged and continuously debunked. For example, Charles Valentine and Eleanor Leacock, as early as the late 1960s, challenged the view that matrifocal household patterns were *inherently* pathological (as well as a uniquely Black cultural trait) and a cause of Black poverty (Valentine 1968; Leacock 1971). Robin Kelley, in his masterful *Yo Mama’s Dysfunktional* (1997), debunked the notion of United States Black culture as undifferentiated and as always already “oppositional.” Douglass Massey and Nancy Denton (1993), Thomas Sugrue (1996), and Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro (1995) have all shown how the so-called “urban crisis” is the result of complex and intertwining factors, such as segregation, unequal distribution of wealth, unemployment, and racism, that have made this country so “anti-Black.” And Susan Greenbaum, in her fascinating study of Afro-Cubans in Tampa, Florida, refutes some scholars’ claim that African Americans exert negative influences on Black immigrants’ values and behaviors and demonstrates instead how historically Black colleges were among a number of African American institutions that “helped support the adjustment of Afro-Cubans growing up in Tampa during the 1930s and 1940s” (Greenbaum 2002: 230). In fact, Greenbaum states frankly, and the informants in her study concur, that: “It is difficult to imagine how Afro-Cuban families and individuals would have survived without reaching out to African Americans during this period” (2002: 230). These examples are just to name a few. Nevertheless, African Americans have always managed to brave the odds and demand justice and equality. Only a brief review of United States (and world) history will reveal that, contrary to what Waters would have us believe, African Americans have always been at the forefront of antiracism and antifascist struggles, both locally and internationally (see, among others, Esedebe 1982; Magubane 1987; Skinner 1992;

Von Eschen 1997; Weisbord 1973). Therefore, to present African American life in the language of "values" and "behavior" outside of adequate sociohistorical and political contexts is, at best, theoretically and methodologically disingenuous. At worse, Waters perpetuates the "culture of poverty" thesis while failing to analyze the contours of United States racism. Racism is a system that structures inequality and works through various institutions and cultural practices to subordinate racialized groups. It is not only about personal relationships, not about whether Blacks (immigrant and United States-born) have "expectations of positive interpersonal relations" with Whites, as Waters tells us (1999a).<sup>29</sup> And race and the processes of racialization do not work alone—race is the modality through which class, gender, nationality, sexuality, and *ethnicity* are lived (Hall 1980).

The language of "values" that is used to propagate the desirability of "ethnic" distinctiveness among Black immigrants reveals a mystifying (and damning) rearticulation of racism, but cloaked in the language of "culture" and "ethnicity." And social scientists are often complicit in the perpetuation of culturally racist assumptions about the inferiority of United States Blacks. Indeed, Waters served as the academic "expert" in the *Economist* article (opt. cit.), implying that Blackamericanization undermines "the immigrant ethos, and the social capital of many Caribbean families" (1996). Used in this way, the cultural narratives of the ethnicity paradigm inflict havoc against United States-born Blacks. This is especially the case when the academic expert links immigrant adjustment in the United States to things inherent in their value system and their cultural norms (San Juan 1992: 38). Taking a cue from Waters's diagnosis, that same *Economist* article ended with the following, echoing social scientific sentiment on African American cultural pathology:

today's West Indian immigrants...try to keep apart from black America, even electing self-consciously West Indian politicians. In sum, their experience reverses the old saw about immigration and prosperity. These days, those who adapt to the environment around them will be worse off than those who cling to an immigrant subculture. And it is not a reversal America can be proud of (p. 28).

### **Navigating the United States racial and ethnic terrain<sup>30</sup>**

It goes without saying that, in many instances, Black immigrants actively differentiate themselves from African Americans. This is done through various narratives of distinction that, significantly, at times involve the rejection of shared cultural affinities with African Americans and a foregrounding of their own distinct and complex histories and experiences. My research<sup>31</sup> with Black immigrants in Houston, Texas, Washington, DC, and my continued interaction with my own Haitian immigrant community in Miami, Florida have revealed to me the many paradoxes of negotiating the racial terrain of the United States. For example, Black immigrants admit that racism is an overwhelming presence in the United States, often asserting that a "real" racist makes no distinction between Black Africans, African

Americans, or Afro-Caribbeans (Apraku 1996). Connected to this reality is the central concern among Black/African immigrants that their histories and cultural particularities tend to be overlooked as they are continuously and unceremoniously seen and related to primarily as racial subjects. The response to this racialization varies, but at times results in stronger affirmation of their *cultural* particularity.

Many Black immigrants acknowledge, however, that because they are immigrants, they do not have the luxury (or the political leverage) to “dwell” on racism and, therefore, turn inward and to their specific communities for support. Yet, there is a tendency to rest part of the blame of racism on United States-born Blacks for not acting in more “self-respecting” ways and for not taking advantage of what they believe to be this country’s numerous economic opportunities (Sutton and Makiesky-Brown 1987). Such claims are often framed around similar discourses of the “culture of poverty” thesis. Hence, Black/African immigrants groups tend to assail what they see as African American “destructive” practices and lack of “cultural values,” “moral laxity,” “government dependency,” and the “breakdown” of the family structure. In fact, many see themselves as bearers of culture, worthy of emulation by African Americans. How, then, should we explain Black immigrants’ views of United States-born Blacks and their move to differentiate themselves? How do we analytically interpret the subjective processes of their identity formation within the context of structural realities without succumbing to culturally racist ideologies? More importantly, what does immigrant differentiation say about the state of race and racialization in this country?

As we have seen above, Mary Waters’s work represents the main line of social scientific response to these questions. For many of these scholars, individual differentiation among Black groups—immigrants and United States-born—occurs because Black immigrants do not want to (nor should they) “assimilate” into a culturally “dysfunctional” African American identity. Such a move would propel them downward (“downward assimilation”) and keep them away from achieving “mainstream success.” To “succeed,” then, Black immigrants can assert cultural repertoire that is distinct from that of African Americans and presumably secure a place among other upwardly mobile “ethnics.”

Although my research has shown that Black immigrants actively differentiate themselves from Black Americans in many of the ways outlined by Waters and other social scientists, my interpretation of these acts differs significantly. First, immigrant self-differentiation alone does not give us enough information to understand the United States processes of racialization and the incorporation of racially distinct immigrants. Certainly, racialized communities have always reacted to racial subordination by foregrounding cultural forms, but such cultural assertion is often a product of racialization, not the cause. Moreover, the reality that Black immigrants differentiate themselves culturally does not diminish their understanding of race or the significance of United States racial formation processes on their experiences (see Burgos 1996; Greenbaum 2002; and Watkins-Owens

1996 for examples). Contrary to many of the claims made by migration and ethnicity scholars, I believe instead that the efforts by Black/African immigrants to assert particularity does not necessarily imply an ability to substitute a racial identity for an "ethnic" one. Nor, I argue, do Black/African immigrants believe this is so. Rather, the Black immigrant response contains, in large part, a critique of racialization of Black people in general and of themselves in particular. As Steven Gregory argues, Black immigrant distinctiveness is not external to the category of race, "nor can it be contained 'within' the nebulous concept of the 'black community'" (1993: 408). Instead, this distinctiveness "articulates with race in complex and multiple ways" (Gregory 1993: 408). It is within this context that a discussion of racialization is needed. Upon entering the United States, Black/African immigrants have to negotiate different identities in a context where the social and political constructs of race significantly inform the meanings of culture, national allegiance, gender, and other forms of identification. Racialization—involuntary insertion into the United States hierarchy—entails engagement with (and ultimate subordination to) the various structures of power. In effect, the process of racialization flattens the immigrants' historical and sociopolitical reality.

Recent studies have shown the impact of racialization processes on Black immigrant–African American interaction over time, stressing not only the complexities of such relations, but also the ways that both groups have worked together against oppressive structural—particularly race, class, and gender—constraints as they strive to make life meaningful (Aparicio 2003; Greenbaum 2002; Watkins-Owens 1996). For example, Susan Greenbaum's work on Afro-Cubans in Tampa, Florida, demonstrates that, during the Jim Crow era, Afro-Cubans were denied rights by both U.S.-born and Cuban immigrant Whites, lumped together with African Americans for discriminatory treatment (2002). Afro-Cuban response to this process of racialization and exclusion came in various forms, not least of which was organizing (and fraternizing) with local African American communities, a practice that continued through the generations. Irma Watkins-Owens shows a similar trajectory among Black immigrant and African Harlemites in the early 1900s, as does Ana Aparicio in her study of Dominican youth organizations in the contemporary era (Watkins-Owens 1996; Aparicio 2003). These and other studies show that Black immigrant–African American relationships in the United States have a long history, are complex and wide ranging, and have yielded various results in confronting the racial hierarchy and in the continuing fight against racism and Black marginalization. What we find, then, is that race remains important to identity formation for all groups racialized as Black in this country and although responses to its articulation vary in different contexts, such responses nevertheless point more to the power and oppressive nature of this structure of dominance than to the purported "cultural pathology" of one group.

A crucial argument in this essay is that while Black/African immigrants are extolled for their cultural distinctiveness, while the narratives of their "success" depict African Americans as culturally deficient, Black/African immigrants are

simultaneously racialized and inscribed also as culturally deficient. Take, for instance, the ways in which Black/African immigrants experience racialization in the United States. The first is the continued racialized and pathological representation of the African continent (and Africans) in the United States. Consider the September 1992 *Time* magazine cover story of the Continent's imminent "doom":

Africa—sub-Saharan Africa, at least<sup>32</sup>—has begun to look like an immense illustration of chaos theory. . . . Much of the continent has turned into a battleground of contending dooms: AIDS and overpopulation, poverty, starvation, illiteracy, corruption, social breakdown, vanishing resources, overcrowded cities, drought, war, and homelessness of war's refugees. Africa has become the basket case of the planet, the 'Third World of the Third World,' a vast continent in free fall (Morrow 1992: 40-42).<sup>33</sup>

When Black/African immigrants are celebrated for their "immigrant ethos," such praise should always be understood in the context of not only the United States' maddening ignorance of global Black cultures and histories, but also its continued dehumanizing and racist representations of Africa and people of African descent (Hsu 1996: 48–49).<sup>34</sup> Could it be that the praise of Black/African immigrant "success" stories also serves the purpose of obfuscating the historical and contemporary imperialist relations between the United States and Africa and the Caribbean?<sup>35</sup> In this context, the question should be at *what* point, within United States discourses of achievement and "cultural" integrity, do Black immigrants make the transition of coming from this background of a "basket-case" of cultural deficiency to becoming the "model citizens" to be emulated?

Of course, another important site of the racialization of Black/African immigrants is in the academy. As I have shown, it is indeed significant that social scientists can praise these immigrants and at the same time continue to racialize them in a way that the pejorative stereotypes of African Americans are understood to be inclusive of Black immigrants. The call for the assertion of "ethnic difference" is a good example because it often does nothing more but further mark the immigrants as forever external to the ideal of "America."

Importantly, Omi and Winant note that racialization is a positioning process in which racialized groups can either affirm or transform racial self-definitions (1986; see also Bashi 1998). The responses of Black immigrant groups as they engage the racial hierarchy may come in the form of a rejection of the stereotypical African American cultural identity they are presented with and a foregrounding of their own complex histories and experiences. But these immigrant responses do *not* (and *cannot*) occur outside of the processes of United States racialization. Thus, any ahistorical and uncontextualized discussions of ethnic identity—outside of other social and political processes of identity formation—cannot possibly convey the complexities of Black immigrant identity and reality. The sense of agency brought to bear when Black immigrants interact with United States racial forma-

tions is more complicated than a foregrounding of "ethnic" identity over a racial one. And this is where, I think, most analyses of Black immigrant identity formation miss the boat.

There is a paradox that develops in the process of affirming Black immigrant particularity. Black immigrant "ethnicity," couched in the language of "cultural distinctiveness," has the effect of reinforcing the Black "culture of poverty" discourse. But since *all* Blacks are racialized, and since the stereotypes of Black cultural "dysfunctionality" are based upon a race and culture conflation, Black immigrants, even as culturally distinct "ethnics," are ultimately affected by (and interpellated into) this discourse. The nuances that underscore this point are lost on social scientists such as Waters and, as a result, she does not make the obvious admission that Black immigrants—as immigrants and *non-citizens*, as "ethnics," as Blacks—are, in the end, much more vulnerable to United States race and racism. How else do we account for the fact that "ethnic" identification did not save Amadou Diallo from forty-one race-inspired bullets?

### **Sociohistorical narratives**

What is significant about the discourse of Black "dysfunctionality" is its direct connection to the cultural narratives of ethnicity that are used to propagate the idea that the "American Dream" is attainable by all, especially immigrants. Thus, cultural and behavioral explanations are often given for the African American inability to "progress." Black immigrants are used as "models" of achievement and their "success" is also given a cultural explanation. Interestingly, other factors, such as class and/or gender (and their intersections with race), rarely enter into such discussions of "progress." Does the fact that African immigrants, specifically, represent the most highly educated group of people in the United States factor into discussions of their identity processes and their differential "success" (Takougang 1995; Speer 1995; Fortney 1972)? Additionally, when, in our analyses, should we include the actual history behind post-1965 African immigration to the United States? This history claims that United States policy toward African immigration (especially African students) in the 1960s was part of "a global containment policy that became necessary in the post-war climate created by the Cold War" (Takougang 1995: 51). Thus, as African decolonization became a reality, this country, through its African Scholarship Program of American Universities, consciously made sure that many future African leaders (and allies) were United States-trained (Takougang 1995: 51). How do we connect this history to other United States immigration policies that not only made it possible for many of these students (and future professionals) to remain in the country, but also made the entrance of "skilled professionals" from Africa relatively easy? How, in our analyses, do we also account for the fact that, even with the possession of social and ethnic/cultural capital (as some scholars would have it) in the United States, the African continent is allowed the lowest number of immigrants, a large number of which are White South Africans

(Speer 1995)? Should we also consider studies that show that, despite their apparent high educational background (compared to *all* United States residents/citizens), Black/African immigrants continue to be either underemployed, continue to make less than even African-born Whites, and often do not have a comparative advantage over less-educated White (and, at times, Black) United States-born citizens (see especially Doodoo and Takyi 2002; Doodoo 1997; Speer 1995)? When, then, do we move beyond merely cultural explanations and contextualize them within larger understandings of domestic and global racial and capitalist hierarchies?

### The cultural poverty of ethnicity

I want to bring together the strands of this essay by making three specific points about the ethnicity concept. First, the egalitarian<sup>36</sup> rhetoric surrounding mainstream narratives of ethnicity functions as proof that America “works” and that its principles and beliefs are fair and reasonable (Hsu 1996: 39). It thus conceals the fact that acceptance into American society is actually restricted to racially distinct groups, however “model” their processes of incorporation (Bashi 1998). This illusion of egalitarianism is fostered by the inability (or refusal) to see how the state and its nationalist precepts constrain the processes of ethnic identification and how they influence modes of “ethnic” organization within and across racial hierarchies (Williams 1989). As Brackette Williams contends, ethnicity theory often “neglects the manner in which ethnicity becomes a euphemism for a subordinated aspect of identity in putatively homogeneous, class-stratified nation-states” (1989: 426). The dream of “American” citizenship has worked more readily for White people (immigrant or not) than for people of color (immigrant or not). Hsu points out that, for White “ethnics,” “initial discrimination and hostility always abated eventually, as they were allowed to ‘assimilate’ [i.e., assert whiteness] into American culture; however, the same has never been true for people of color” (1996: 39). It is not surprising, then, that there can be a “celebration” of Black immigrant “ethnicity” along with the assumptions of egalitarianism while an African immigrant like Amadou Diallo can be murdered *because* of his race and *despite* his “ethnic” attributes.

Secondly, ethnicity has become a way to creatively circumvent, while actively re-inscribing, racial difference. In effect, I argue (along with others) that the “ethnic” identity process itself is a *racializing* project (Bashi 1998). Despite the national discourse of “America,” racial identity is the crucial factor deciding who fully is a citizen of this nation (Hsu 1996: 40; see also Malik 1996; Omi and Winant 1986). Processes of racialization map ethnicities to particular races, such that “ethnic” identification often reflects a near-automatic insertion into the United States racial hierarchy (Bashi 1998: 966; see also Bashi and McDaniel 1997). If options for “assimilation” were not racially structured, for example, why then are Black immigrants said to *only* be able to “assimilate” into Black America? Why is Black immigrant “success” and “progress” *not* compared to those of United States-born

Whites? If we think of early ethnicity theory and the racist assigning of racial minorities to one "ethnic" slot (i.e., the "they all look alike" model), while allowing multiple "ethnic" categories for Europeans and compare that with the current conception of a *singular* African immigrant "ethnic" identity,<sup>37</sup> then we can agree with Bashi's allusion to a "racially understood ethnicity." It is, therefore, no surprise that we often see *an* African immigrant "ethnic" group represented and not Ashanti, Ga, Kikuyu, Hausa, Ibo, or Mende immigrants.

Finally, there is the subtle but steady convergence of ethnicity theorization with a culturalist racism. Kamala Visweswaran advances such a critique when she contends that culture has come to be seen

as interchangeable with ethnic group, and ethnic group or culture [has come] to substitute race. . . . But as the dominant view of race is a biological one, when this substitution of terms is effected, culture and ethnicity are themselves essentialized or biologized [leading to] a kind of "culturalist racism" (1998: 76).

Cultural racism is on the increase everywhere and ethnicity theory is expressly implicated, as culture underlies most configurations of ethnic identity. As theorists of ethnicity continue to conceptualize ethnicity through a narrative of subjective cultural identification while having a blindness to the processes that constrain this identification, ethnicity (and culture) will be asked to do the work of race (Visweswaran 1998).

## **Conclusion**

In this essay, I do not maintain that Black immigrants and African Americans undergo identical processes of racial and "ethnic" identity formation. Black immigrants experience race and racism in ways that are both similar to and distinct from how race is lived by United States-born Blacks (Gregory 1993). The point to be made here, however, is that processes that are labeled ethnicity are inextricably bound to ideas of race and that the current social science claims to Black distinctiveness obscure the deeply political import of cultural differences. Thus, in our attempts to explore and understand Black immigrant identity formation, we need to allow for a more complex and dynamic discussion of United States Black identity formations in general. The United States Black population has never been homogeneous and the rise in the number of Black immigrants with distinct and historically specific experiences will no doubt affect the nature of research about Black populations. Yet, race continues to be a central axis of social relations in the United States that cannot be subsumed under or reduced by putatively broader categories such as ethnicity (Omi and Winant 1986). Discussions of race cannot, therefore, remain at the level of intraracial (Black-Black) relationships and comparisons without attention to power. Our work should be attentive to the ways in which various Black groups experience race and, in response, create racial mean-

ings for themselves.

In this essay, I have argued that the social science literature of migration and ethnicity is deeply engaged in the project of “ethnic-myth-making” (Steinberg 1981). Specifically, Black immigrant ethnicity is strategically being used to advance racist ideas about Black peoples in general (United States-born or foreign). Moreover, the use of ethnicity in this way specifically reveals the potency of United States racism whereby the perceived retention of “ethnic” identity of Black immigrants continues to serve also as a marker of racial difference. Although the special position of “blackness” in this country works to make the experiences of Black immigrants and African Americans unique, we can nevertheless think of ways that this analysis can be extended to other racialized groups. We can ask, for example, how Asian American and Latino “ethnicity” work in the comparable ways. How are Asian American and Latino cultural distinctiveness used to promote “culture of poverty” theories not only about African Americans, but also about hyperracialized immigrants such as Filipino/as, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans? How does such theorizing impact on-the-ground relationships among various racialized groups? More importantly, how can such discourse work to maintain the privilege of whiteness and the structures of white supremacy to the detriment of *all* racialized groups? As Brackette Williams argues, ethnicity as a label may “sound better than tribe, race, or barbarian, but with respect to political consequences, it still identifies those who are at the borders of the empire” (1989: 441). I suggest that our analyses should always keep in sharp focus United States structures of racial dominance. When we as social scientists do not ground our theorization in analyses of the power relations inherent in structures of domination, we become complicit in a culturalist racism that ultimately works to strengthen the United States racial hierarchy.

## Notes

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1. Quoted in Dinwiddie-Boyd (1996).
2. I want to thank Ben Chappell for this insight. Also, we should recall that the brutal murder of Taisha Miller (a 19-year-old African American woman) by police in Riverside, California, a couple of

months earlier (December 1998) did not receive as much coverage nor did it elicit as much outrage as the Diallo incident. Miller was found unconscious in her car with the doors locked and a gun on her lap. Her friends, fearing that she was sick, called for an ambulance. Instead, four police cars arrived. As Miller was slowly revived from police knocking on the car window, she appeared to be suffering from a seizure. Police instead broke her car window and, under the impression that she was reaching for her gun, fired at least 27 shots, instantly killing the unconscious young woman (see Feagin et al. 2001).

3. Though fully aware of the complexities of the interplay of notions of "race," Blackness, and identity, I will be using this term to refer to both Black African and Caribbean immigrants. I sometimes also use the two words, "Black" and "African," interchangeably (all the while cognizant of the complications associated with doing so). This is often because, the representations of Black immigrants blur national (and continental) identities. Also, although most research has been on Black immigrants from the Caribbean, the theorization is almost always extended to West African immigrants.
4. According to this author, these "ills" include teenage pregnancy, poor academic achievement, single-parent households, and crime.
5. Within three months of its appearance, at least four separate newspaper articles (ranging from the *Baltimore Sun* to the *Tampa Tribune*) used the *Economist* article on African immigrants to feature the distinctiveness of "America's newest immigrants."
6. At this point, it is not specifically clear why there seems to be such popular interest in comparisons between African Americans and Black immigrants. Indeed, the theme of difference within United States Black populations is not new, as a number of Black scholars over the years have addressed the issue (see, for example, Bryce-Laporte 1972; Reid 1939). At the very least, most African Americans are very much aware of the diversity within their communities, from their own neighbors in segregated areas of various cities to the many "foreign" Black leaders, academics, and nationalists such as Marcus Garvey, Arthur Schomburg, Stokely Carmichael, Louis Farrakhan, etc. (see Watkins-Owens 1996 and Sánchez González 2001 for examples). Nevertheless, as late as 1972, Roy Bryce-Laporte bitterly complained about the "invisibility" of Black immigrants both within the social science literature and in society at large. I believe, however, that there may be a few factors involved in the current trend of Black immigrant visibility and differentiation. First, the social science focus on immigrants of color, especially since the mid-1980s, has awakened interest within various academic and nonacademic circles. Second, the increased visibility of Black immigrants in major cities of the United States (such as New York, Boston, and Miami) as well as their public differentiation in some cases (such as the discriminatory national ban against Haitian immigrants from donating blood throughout the 1980s or the cases of police brutality against Abner Louima and Amadou Diallo) have worked to steer attention toward distinctive communities within the larger United States Black population. The focus on comparing these two complex groups is, in itself, what stands out to me at this historical juncture. And I contend that this move has much to do with the contemporary social and political context of discourses and practices that advocate, however unwittingly, notions of a color-blind "postraciality."
7. I will explain this term later in the essay.
8. Significantly, the saliency of the ethnicity—and, to a larger extent, culture—concept comes, in part, from a theoretical shift within the discipline of anthropology in the early part of the twentieth century. Franz Boas, the central figure in the making of contemporary cultural anthropology, and a liberal and anti-racist, succeeded in reorienting anthropological thinking. He separated notions of culture from the biological determinism of the concept of race and established culture as the key object in anthropological study (Malik 1996). Ironically, Boas's intervention resulted in the complete focus on cultural practices and the inability of anthropology to directly address the structural realities of race and racial oppression (see Harrison 1995; Pierre 2002; and Shanklin 1994, 2000). In his review of Boas, Kenan Malik correctly argues, "It would be difficult to overestimate the impact of Boas, not simply on anthropology, but on our everyday perceptions of race, culture and difference" (1996: 150).
9. Milton Gordon calls this desired assimilation as "Angloconformity," to explain how the United States nation, largely White and Anglosaxon, absorbed the many culturally distinct European popu-

- lations. Angloconformity assumes the “desirability of maintaining English institutions (as modified by the American Revolution), the English language, and English-oriented cultural patterns as dominant and standard in American life” (Gordon 1971: 264).
10. Significantly, the ability of mainstream White America to tolerate “ongoing ethnicity” is directly linked to the reality that, although some European immigrants were not always considered “White,” they eventually were able to achieve Whiteness through a racialization process that solidified their privilege as “White.” Of course, this racialization always consisted in part of an anti-Black stance.
  11. Thus, groups with distinct histories and processes of racialization were all treated equally as ethnics. For Glazer and Moynihan (1963), Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Italians were all treated as if they experienced racial and ethnic incorporation into the United States in the exact same ways.
  12. Thomas A. Guglielmo reinforces this point in his recent work on Italian immigrants, arguing that “one color line existed separating ‘whites’ [including European immigrants] from the ‘colored races’—groups such as ‘Negroes,’ ‘Orientals,’ and sometimes ‘Mexicans’” (2003: 6). Guglielmo, of course, joins a number of scholars who have always contended that the experiences of non-White groups were, like those of African Americans, structured through a racial and racializing hierarchy with “whiteness” as the power position (for Asian American and Latino examples, see Hsu 1996; Lowe 1996; Ong and Liu 1994; Saito 1998; Sanchez 1993, 1999; and San Juan 1992, 1999, 2002, among others).
  13. Alexander Saxton was critiquing Glazer’s conservative book *Affirmative Discrimination*, a book explicitly against the United States government’s “affirmative measures” to attempt to create equality for racial minorities. It is significant to note that Glazer was decidedly “liberal” in his earlier collaborations with Moynihan on theorizing ethnicity.
  14. Guglielmo (2003) has recently challenged the “become white” thesis of European immigrant incorporation into the United States. In his book, *White on Arrival*, he argues instead that Italian immigrants, like other Europeans, “did not need to become white; they always were in numerous, critical ways” (2003: 7). What is significant for Guglielmo, then, are the different definitions given to “color” and “race” in the early years of the twentieth century, where an Italian could be considered “white” by color and “Italian” by race and still maintain “whiteness” as her or his “most prized possession” (2003: 10). Thus, s/he would be granted access to venues, jobs, even citizenship—things not granted to those, such as African Americans and Asian Americans, who had no such claim to Whiteness.
  15. Bashi and McDaniel go on to correctly argue:

As other researchers have done since, Myrdal focused on the structural causes of racial differences and assumes that behavioral differences are in part to blame. . . . These researchers assume that the problems African Americans face are due to their inability to emulate the behavior of their ‘fellow citizens.’ The barriers to African American emulation of European behavior are seen as structural, that is, racial segregation in schooling and housing and a lack of economic opportunities. . . . It is thought that by removing the barriers to African American participation in society as a whole, local social institutions could foster a change in African American behavior. . . . One of the many problems with this belief stems from the confounding of race with ethnicity (1997: 669).

16. The same phenomenon occurs for other racial minority groups: Asians/Asian Americans, Latina/o, and Native Americans (Saito 1998; Sanchez 1993). Indeed, a comparative study of the misuse of “ethnicity” theory in studies of other racialized non-Black groups is bound to yield comparable results (see especially San Juan 1992, 2002).
17. There were, of course, very few exceptions to this characterization, as in the case of the “Black middle class” (see Frazier 1957).
18. Charles Valentine, in his powerful critique, argues that much of the material found in the more recent literature on the “culture of poverty” and “lower-class culture” is prefigured in a specific intellectual history dating to what he terms “the pejorative tradition of E. Franklin Frazier.” With his glorification of the “genteel traditions of a small group of mulattoes who assimilated the morals

- and manners of the slaveholding aristocracy," Frazier set up the "moralistic denigration of the [Black] lower class" that is prominently perpetuated in the writings of academics such as Glazer and one of his collaborators, Moyhinhan (Valentine 1968: 19–22).
19. These scholars are more appropriately known as the "structuralists." Most prominent among them are William Julius Wilson, who, despite recognizing the economic plight of the urban poor, nevertheless argued that Black unemployment "has eroded the work ethic and discipline of the underclass, leading to behaviors that allow employers to justify not hiring them" (Kelley 1997).
  20. This is especially true in the case of Haitian immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s, who, referred to pejoratively as the "boat people," suffered some of the most brutal anti-immigrant attack (in various forms). There is/was also the stereotypical depictions Jamaican "gangsters" and "drug-dealers."
  21. Africans, however, still make up the lowest number of immigrants allowed in the United States.
  22. This is a process that is most explicitly conveyed in Halter's title, *Between Race and Ethnicity* (1993), or a chapter in Water's text, *Black Identities* (1999a), entitled, "Racial and Ethnic Identity Choices."
  23. The "model minority" myth is mostly associated with popular and academic references to Asian-Americans in the United States. This "myth" continues even as it has been challenged by Asian American and other scholars (see Cheng and Yang 1996; Hsu 1996; Takaki 1989).
  24. That is if, indeed, there is such a thing as "assimilation."
  25. See also Stoller 1996 and Holzman 2000 for examples that use African immigrants. My purpose in this section is not to single out Mary C. Waters. I focus on her work because Waters is probably recognized as the foremost expert on Black immigrant identity. Furthermore, to me, Waters represents a specific powerful "international migration studies" think tank. One only needs a brief review of the various bibliographies of the work of members of this group to see that the scholars all work in harmony, mostly citing each other (see, for example, works by Zhou 1997; Waters 1994, 1999a, 1999b; Portes 1996; Portes and Zhou 1993, 1994; Gans 1992; Rumbaut 1991, Zhou and Bankston 1994).
  26. Waters does not use this term. I have created it to better describe the process to which she refers.
  27. Waters uses both Kasinitz and Thomas Sowell as references when she discusses what she presents as African American cultural deficiencies. She writes that her work "lend[s] some support to Sowell and other earlier writers' arguments about the cultural differences between West Indians and American blacks, for, as Kasinitz points out, 'if propensity towards education and two income families are not cultural traits, what are?'" (1999a: 99). Here, we clearly see the continuation of the "culture of poverty" trend of equating circumstance and behavior to culture and, more importantly, of generalizing about African American life experiences and castigating them as "bad" behavior/culture.
  28. In fact, the "culture of poverty" discourse has its theoretical antecedents in the early scholarship of E. Franklin Frazier and his contemporaries, who glorified Black middle-class appropriation of White cultural virtues (see Valentine 1968).
  29. Of course, focusing on whether Blacks have positive or negative "expectations" of interpersonal relations with Whites places the burden of racism on Black peoples. The implication is that Whites have no responsibility to also challenge the racial hierarchy. Susan Greenbaum makes a similar argument when she points to the "shortcomings of analyses that hold African Americans to be harmful to black immigrant interests and suggest that the ones immigrants should want to please are [Whites]" (2002: 228).
  30. I thank Charles Hale for his insights on this section.
  31. My earlier research was an ethnographic study of the Nigerian immigrant population in Houston, Texas.
  32. Of course, the North African/Sub-Saharan African divide is explicitly racialized.
  33. See, especially, the special cover issue of *The Economist* on Africa as the "Hopeless Continent" (2000). Of course, *The Economist* is replete with stories and editorials that provide disparaging representations of Africa and its peoples.
  34. Also consider United States representations of Haiti and Haitian peoples and cultures. Also notice here that Africa's (and Haiti's) "basket case" conditions are presented as the results of self-created problems and *not* as part of a legacy of racial slavery and colonialism.

35. I thank Miguel Gomez for this insight.
36. Hsu (1996) has argued that there is a false national mythology that attempts to underscore the country's egalitarian generosity toward all oppressed people. "The creation of the 'model minority' myth in the 1960s, for example, was intimately tied to the nation's need to narrate itself as a democratic community." (42).
37. Part of the hegemonic problematic of the ethnicity concept is its elision of Black African difference. Thus, the various African immigrant communities with distinct and numerous "ethnic" identities, national backgrounds, languages, and cultures are all seen, within the United States context, as one "ethnic" group. This is a continuation of not allowing too much diversity among Blacks (see Omi and Winant 1986).

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