

# “I Am Blacker Than You”: Theorizing Conflict Between African Immigrants and African Americans in the United States

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## Abstract

This paper attempts to place the African immigrant and the African American in the context of their conditions in the United States. It addresses the issue of Americanization and the development of multiple identities that is fundamental to the contestation of “Blackness” in the United States. More importantly, the study discusses resource allocation and appropriation as critical to understanding the schisms between the African immigrant and the African American, focusing especially on how the conflict and tension potentially benefits other racial categories. It highlights the fact that conflict and tension between both groups result directly from the dominant White racial framing, wherein powerless groups unable to effectively challenge the forces that oppress them, attack themselves or people like themselves. To explain this complex interaction between Whites, African immigrants, and African Americans, this paper develops the theory of manipulative deflection, the central tenet of which is the subjective experience of deprivation that diminishes the construction of a holistic Black identity and produces confusion and conflict among Blacks in the United States.

## Keywords

sociology of race and ethnicity, sociology, social sciences, Black studies, sociological theory, cultural studies, sociological research methods, social structure

## Introduction

African immigrants in the United States have been frequently omitted or ignored in discourses of race/ethnicity. Several factors account for this, the most prominent being the idea that the population of African immigrants in this country is too small compared with other growing immigrant populations to warrant the dedication of resources toward its study. Yet, the number of this immigrant population is thought to be growing. Although their population is increasing, little or no research work has been undertaken to study them in order to gain some conceptual understanding of their unique characteristics, experience with immigration, adaptation to the American way of life, and their construction of a distinct immigrant identity that is different from and may be oppositional to the existing racial/ethnic identities. In particular, not much attention is paid to the increasing tensions and antagonisms between African immigrants and African Americans, which often have degenerated into violence, and how these tensions and antagonisms have hampered genuine integration, collaboration, and cooperation between both groups of Black people.

In the United States, racial discrimination is one of the most persistent and salient characteristics of society (Loury, 2007). Historically, Blacks have occupied and continue to occupy a position of disadvantage relative to other racial

groups despite the many decades of “racial progress” (Thomas, 2000). That race plays an important role in defining social objects and in allocating opportunities and rewards in contemporary U.S. society has been well documented in various studies including studies on employment (e.g., Feagin & Sykes, 1994; Neckerman & Kirschenman, 2000; Royster, 2003), promotion (e.g., Feagin & Sykes, 1994; Johnson & Herring, 1989; Royster, 2003), income (e.g., Cotton, 1990; Thomas, 1993; Thomas, Herring, & Horton, 1994), wealth, home ownership, and housing values (e.g., Horton & Thomas, 1998; Jackman & Jackman, 1980; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004), segregation (e.g., Gallagher, 2004; Houts Picca & Feagin, 2007; Massey & Denton, 1993), and education (e.g., Ferguson, 2003; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986). Unequal access to social opportunities and resources is often a result of racism, which Wellman (1993) defines as “a structural relationship based on the subordination of one racial group by another” (p. 53). Thomas (2000) in response to Wellman’s definition argues that the

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determining feature of racism is not “prejudice towards Blacks, but rather the superior position of Whites and the institutions—ideological as well as structural—which maintain it” (p. 79). Embedded in these definitions is the fact that racism involves ideas (legitimations) and practices (discrimination) that not only create but also sustain and reproduce the system of White privilege in the United States.

Yet, in recent years, it would appear that racism involving Blacks and Whites in the United States is becoming less overt and more covert, and by implication, obfuscating contemporary race realities in the United States. This shift has prompted several social commentators, academics, and theorists to suggest that America is no longer deeply racialized and that Blacks are no longer a racially disadvantaged group in the United States (Wilson, 1978, 1980). Instead, several studies suggest that other factors including social and cultural characteristics explain the disadvantaged positions of Blacks compared to Whites in the United States (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Becker, 1964; Freeman, 1976; Murray, 1984; Smith & Welch, 1977; Welch, 1973; Wilson, 1978, 1980). These theories hinge on the partial successes recorded by Blacks in their struggles for self-identity, liberty, and equality. These successes that were spearheaded by the Civil Rights Movement include the dismantling of official segregation, the introduction of Affirmative Action, the development of a Black middle class, the entrance of many Black politicians into elective offices culminating in the Barack Obama presidency. Because of these and other less notable gains, many theories have been advanced that argue that American society is no longer racialized and that the problems Blacks face are due to cultural and social anomalies that could be corrected if Blacks make incisive cultural and social adjustments (Feagin, 2006; Thomas, 2000).

The idea that social and cultural deficiencies and not race is responsible for the condition of the Black community also suggests that Black people are a homogeneous group that manifest the same cultural and social deficiencies and are susceptible to the same economic and social shocks. While theoretically, this may appear to be the case, practically, nothing may be further from the truth. There appears to be growing tensions and conflict within the minority Black population in the United States that suggests that this community is not homogeneous. For example, African immigrants are questioning their racial categorization as Black, which they see as a metonymic device for the inferior position of African Americans relative to Whites. Differences in ethnicity, nationalism, language, adaptation to life in the United States, economic interests, and so on are increasingly manifesting and creating enmity and competition instead of friendship and collaboration between both groups of Black people. Yet, very little is said or written about this conflict, perhaps because intraracial or intraethnic conflict especially involving minority populations is thought to lack the necessary social power capable of capturing the American imagination. Whatever the case, this paper is committed to understanding

the bases of the conflict and its consequences on Black people as well as the entire society.

## **Theorizing Conflict Between African Americans and African Immigrants in the United States**

Sociological theory has less frequently encouraged hypotheses about within-group differences than between-group inequality. For example, theories of labor market discrimination predict Whites earn more than Blacks (Feagin & Sykes, 1994; Neckerman & Kirschenman, 2000; Royster, 2003) and human capital theory explain achievement gap between White and Black students (Ferguson, 2003; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986). Very few theories interrogate internal differences within racial categories such as between African immigrants and African Americans. Yet, within-group variance also contributes to inequality (Western & Bloome, 2009) and conflict. Although it is often overlooked, within-group conflicts deserve attention because they contribute to between-group racial tensions in substantively important ways. For example, tensions between a specific group of Whites and Blacks may originate from tensions between African Americans and African immigrants including tensions that are thought to be activated by Whites to “divide and conquer” Blacks. The structure of within-group tensions may be especially important where the group in question is a minority with a history of being discriminated against overtly and systematically.

Although conceptions about race in America among academics continue to emphasize local, mutable, and contradictory constructions (Bailey, 2001), the public continues to treat the issue of race as a dichotomy, that is in either White or Black terms. These categories, which continue to have salience, have historically structured the American way of life especially through residential patterns, marriage or choice of life partner, income distribution, access to health care, church and community membership, and political participation. This structuring of society continues to inform and shape the social reality of both Whites and Blacks in the United States (Bailey, 2001; Feagin, 1991; Omi & Winant, 1994). In theory, the Black–White racial bifurcation of American society is thought to be meaningful and objective and reflects natural categories and differences that are not valuatative; that is, these natural differences do not suggest inequality (Bailey, 2001), which may not be so in reality.

The apparent inviolability of the prevailing racial categorization is increasingly being challenged by new immigrants through subtle and not so subtle assertions and constructions of identities that do not conform to the prevailing categorization. Many new migrants come from Africa and they are asserting or constructing identities that potentially attack the foundational ideas about race in America. These new migrants are increasingly problematizing the prevailing racial categories not only by their lack of fit (Bailey, 2001)

but also by injecting the fundamentally different systems of social classifications that they bring with them into the American racial complex. For example, the identity frames in their countries of origin continue to influence migrants' conception of the self and structures the way(s) they interact with others in the United States. These deeply felt cultural understandings, for instance, determine understandings about discrimination and their willingness to either challenge it or adapt to it in ways they deem appropriate to the circumstance, which may or may not be culturally approved. Thus, migrants because of their different sociohistorical experiences are confronting and negotiating the prevailing system of racial categorization and differentiation at the microsocial level in their everyday interaction with the rest of America (Mittelberg & Waters, 1993). The negotiation of postmigration encounter, especially at the microsocial level, is fraught with problems including tensions and conflicts as between African immigrants and African Americans.

The clash of social categorization systems and meanings (Bailey, 2001) between African immigrants and African Americans often occurs for four interrelated reasons. First, in terms of phenotype, African immigrants correspond to the Black racial category even though their lived experiences, language, and culture are markedly different from one another. Their nonelective inclusion in the Black category is based on the "one-drop" (Davis, 1991) or "hypodescent" (Harris, 1964) rule, which has historically been the preeminent criterion for social categorization in the United States (Bailey, 2001). African immigrants, however, define their race in terms of language, sociocultural heritage, and national origin by referring to their race variously as "Nigerian American," "Sudanese American," "Ghanian American," "Ethiopian American," etc., and not as "Black" or "African American." The construction and/or enactment of distinct ethnolinguistic identities (including preliminary construction of pseudomigrant identities) by African immigrants signify inherent contradictions within the amorphous "Black" identity that is thought to be a code word for African American. In essence, the African American identity historically has condensed the identities of African immigrants and their descendants in America (Bailey, 2001; Waters, 1991) in ways believed to advance more disadvantages than benefits. To be counted, the African immigrant must pass as African American, and this becomes the bases for accessing the limited opportunities and resources available to Blacks in the United States.

Second, African immigrants have understandings that are fundamentally different from those of African Americans about their ancestry, which potentially generates hostility between both groups. In the United States, the African American has experienced discrimination in magnitudes that have concomitantly diminished not only his identity but also his self-worth as a progressively creative social entity. The way he has been treated is the product and consequence of ideas of race as dichotomous categories of Black and White,

which represent unbridgeable and inequitable difference (Bailey, 2001). For the African immigrant, in contrast, understandings of the self are couched in notions of ethnicity or ethnic differences, which typically do not involve valuation. While size of an ethnic group relative to the population may determine access to certain opportunities, these opportunities are not exclusively distributed on the basis of the inherent biological superiority or inferiority of a group.

Third, because the prevailing system of racial classification lumps African immigrants and African Americans into the Black or African American category without enabling these elements to make clear behavioral and cultural assertions based on their sociohistorical milieus, opportunities and resources can only be accessed as African American. And in an environment where the African American identity is disvalued or has limited purchasing power, elements within must find creative ways to compete for the limited opportunities available to the category. This, often, produces conflict such as involves, for African immigrants, the creation of double boundaries (Royce, 1982) including a boundary that identifies him from within the Black category as different (and perhaps oppositional) and the other that identifies him from the outside as the same, materially and conceptually. Thus, the self-ascription as "Nigerian-American" or other hyphenated identity is meant to repudiate the historically fixed color line and is seen to constitute the best avenue for unlocking opportunities and resources that are locked to African Americans or Blacks.

Finally, while many factors contribute to social conflict including violent conflict, ethnic or intraracial conflict often entails the construction of outer and inner limits of group boundaries or of the construction of a "certain perception of one's own group and that of the other" (Slocum-Bradley, 2008, p. 1). As the American society has been increasingly susceptible to globalization (has been in fact the globalizer-in-chief) and its influences including the economic shocks that result from a shrinking (or expanding) market or the economic meltdown that is thought to be partly the fault of porous borders and illegal immigration, people's identity concepts, which are typically tied to their resources and opportunities, are increasingly undergoing change and are generating fear and provoking conflict. Taking advantage of this uncertainty and fear, identity has become a tool for those desiring to control others (and annexing or appropriating resources and opportunities open to these others) by manipulating perceived differences in these "others." By manipulating the identity concepts of those often unaware (Slocum-Bradley, 2008) or who in any case have limited social resources and power to resist, groups have fomented intragroup hate and instigated conflict—sometimes violent conflict—to protect and preserve their dominant status and the opportunities and rewards that come with it, while diminishing the status and by implication the share of opportunities and rewards of minority populations such as Blacks in the United States.

## Method

### Data

Data for this study were collected from Internet blog sites and online discussion boards that have addressed antagonisms and tensions between African immigrants and African Americans in the United States. In all, I analyze about 400 pages of data involving feeds from 71 self-identified African immigrants, 68 self-identified African Americans, and 29 people who self-identified as White. The bloggers did not identify their age, educational qualifications, marital status, religious affiliations, and income or social class levels. As this study is not as interested in the sociodemographic composition of respondents as it is with understanding the nature of the conflict that they speak to, the non-disclosure of pertinent socio-demographic information does not invalidate the data or my analysis. Instead, the major challenge is that the blog entries and the comments they elicit are often based on the exchange of many small bits of information, which gives a sense of banality to the discussions. This problem is magnified by the fact that the blogs have no filters, which means that anyone can make comments. Attempting to determine which contributions are valuable or authoritative becomes very difficult. Despite these shortcomings, the blogs were especially useful because of their comment features, which in each case enabled bloggers to engage each other thereby contributing depth to the discussions. It is these comments, which often took the form of commentariat that provided great insights about the conflict between African Americans and African immigrants in the United States.

The blogs include "Thumper's Corner Discussion Board" (aalbc.com) moderated by Kola Boof. The respondents reacted to several articles beginning with Erin Chan's article titled "Overcoming Perceptions: African Immigrants Seek Ties, Harmony With American Blacks." The article was posted on Friday, April 1, 2005, and received reactions on Monday, April 4 and Tuesday, April 5, 2005. The same article was posted on "destee.com" by "PanAfrican" on September 24, 2005, and received responses up till November 8, 2005. Destee.com also posted another article "African Immigrants Face Bias From Blacks: Tension Climbs Highest in Poor Communities" on Monday, February 13, 2006. The article was written by Ervin Dyer for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. The article generated responses up till January 6, 2010. The third article "Poor People Must Learn to Help Themselves" was written by ZannaVaida on July 29, 2006. The discussion that followed was moderated by Tonya, a blogger. Responses to the article were captured between July 29, 2006, and July 31, 2006. The fourth article "Scam: How the Black Leadership Exploits America" was written on September 15, 2003 by Rev. Jesse Lee Peterson also known as "the other Jesse." The discussion that followed was moderated by another blogger, Zane. Responses were recorded over several days from September 15, 2003, to September 24, 2003.

These articles and the reactions they elicited offers an opportunity to understand the issues that are central to both groups of Black people in the United States as well as offer insight into how both groups perceive each other. In essence, the articles will enable an analysis of the cause(s) and nature of the conflict between both groups. Also, because the blogs captured reactions across several years, we gain interesting but valuable insight about how these views change or are modified in consonance with changing social perceptions and realities. To gain conceptual richness about the dynamics of the conflict, I rely on four articles written between 2005 and 2008. The first of these was an editorial written on November 3, 2005, and carried in the *Philadelphia Enquirer* titled "Africans Versus African Americans in Philly." The second article was written by William Femi Awodele for the christiancouples.org. It was titled "African Immigrants and the African American: Understanding the Relationship." The third article was a blog article written by John Brimelow for vdare.com in 2008 titled "African Immigrants Versus African Americans: Who Is Right." The fourth article titled "Africans in US: Caught Between Two Worlds" was written by David Crary in 2007 for the Associated Press. The data are analyzed using grounded theory methodology (GTM) and the Nvivo data analytic software.

### Analytic Strategy

The data presented here are secondary data. My theoretical approach is impelled by the need to understand the responses as part of an ongoing process of induction. The primary motivation is to engage the multiple stories being told by the bloggers and their audience, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of the "single story." The stories told by the bloggers form part of their interpretive frameworks for making sense out of the constant tension between African immigrants and African Americans within the context of a deeply racialized U.S. society. Yet, even these stories are fragments representing only one set of explanations among many. Each story is dependent on the context in which it is told. Perhaps, the anonymity of the bloggers allowed them to craft tales that would have been fundamentally different had they been interviewed directly on these issues. Moreover, the bloggers had to respond to the articles and offered no elaboration unless challenged by other bloggers.

Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously according to GTM methods recommended by LaRossa (2005). According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982, p. 145), qualitative data analysis involves "working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others." This definition as well as LaRossa's step-by-step approach for doing GTM guided the inductive analysis of the data. Inductive analysis implies that the data generates the theory (Patton, 1990). This process, according to Hoepfl (1997, p.



55), requires that the research be creative because the challenge is to “place the raw data into logical, meaningful categories; to examine them in a holistic fashion; and to find a way to communicate this information to others.” Throughout this analysis, I remained strongly vested in the respondents’ story and established several discursive frames based on their perspectives. This mapping, which results from immersion in the data, generated the theory of manipulative deflection. The analytic power of the theory inheres in its ability to engage and connect the different levels of thought about the conflict. Framed in terms of the perceived power asymmetry that has always rallied minority groups in the United States, the theory speaks directly to the lopsided distribution of resources and opportunities among racial groups in the United States, which often deflects into intrarace conflict such as between African Americans and African immigrants.

### Contesting the Black Identity

There are deep complexities in studying the conflict between African immigrants and African Americans in the United States. These complexities are imbedded in the intersections between multiple racial/ethnic identities and acculturation (Americanization). According to Kamya (1997, p. 154),

Although African immigrants share a number of similarities with African Americans, the question of ethnic identity formation vary. African immigrants in the United States may see themselves as Black people, immigrants, or distinct ethnic groups. These levels are compounded by African immigrants own self-perception, the immediate community’s (African Americans) perception, and the general ordering of forces within the larger host community (the United States). The interactive processes of these levels will determine the unfolding of African immigrants’ ethnic identity.

In the United States, the construction and or maintenance of an ethnic identity hinges on adaptation to a racial social structure. Accordingly, African immigrants and African Americans must struggle to carve out their identities from the existing racial categorizations. Their ability to do this is dependent on the ordering of forces within the existing racial structure and these forces roam free of the control of these populations. For African immigrants, the concept of race is complex, befuddling, and often requires the development of new types of *vestehen* or knowledge. They often experience what Deng (1995) calls “racial identity crisis” or confusion over what people objectively are and what they perceive themselves to be. Following the dismantling of slavery, Mulattos, Creoles, and house slaves, who were not prepared for the new reality of being lumped indiscriminately with the “darker” Black people experienced similar racial identity crisis (see Coombs, 1993). Thus, the labeling and lumping of African immigrants within the amorphous Black racial

category, especially when that category continues to face systemic discrimination in a society that privilege Whiteness, causes apprehension and consternation in some African immigrants and resentment in others.

Reacting to the negativity that enshroud the category “Black,” African immigrants find themselves resenting and resisting the “Black” identity with its pejorative sociopolitical and historical referent. Rejecting the amorphous black racial identity becomes the motive force for the social construction of a hyphenated ethnic identity such as “Nigerian American,” “Sudanese American,” “Kenyan American” or a pseudo-immigrant identity that reflects the history, culture, and socioeconomic experiences of African immigrants. In rejecting the Black identity, African immigrants were not rejecting “blackness” per se, but the ordering of forces around race that considers them only as appendages of the African American (the emergent custodian of the “Black” identity) with the aim of marginalizing them. In context, they feel cramped by the narrowness of American racial definitions and perception in which “blackness” does not just define one’s skin color, but is more often a euphemism for African American, wherein to be counted, identified, and addressed African immigrants must pass as African Americans, often to their economic and social disadvantage.

Although the identification and categorization of individuals by race is prevalent in the United States, the concept of ethnicity is central to that categorization. Ethnic identity supplies only one aspect of the answer to the question who am I? According to Bernal and Knight (1993), ethnic identity constitutes a basic part of the ethnic individual’s personality and is a powerful contributor to ethnic group formation and maintenance. Apart from being a social construct, ethnic identity is also a psychological construct, a set of self-ideas about one’s own ethnic group membership, and it is multidimensional in that it has several dimensions and components along which these self-ideas vary. One dimension along which people’s views of their ethnic selves vary is self-identification, which refers to the ethnic labels or terms that people use in identifying themselves, and the meanings of these labels. A second dimension is the knowledge or ideas they have about their ethnic culture including the traditions, customs, values, and behaviors permissible within that culture. A third dimension is the preferences, feelings, and values that people have about their ethnic group membership and culture. Ethnic people may embrace, reject, or have neutral feelings and preferences about their ethnic families, companions, and values.

One of the main sources of conflict between African immigrants and African Americans is how they perceive their ethnic identities. For example, Nyibol an immigrant from Sudan observes that,

African Americans have no immediate sense of ethnicity. They have no conception of an ethnic identity. We African immigrants

have a strong sense of ethnic identity. I am first and foremost Sudanese before I am African before I am Black before I am Sudanese American. This is a big thing for me unlike the African American who only has a sense of racial identity. In everything he does, he sees himself as a descendant of a slave and oppressed by that history in America. He sees White America as the oppressor actively aided by the African immigrant. He despises us because of that.

African immigrants believe that their attachment to some other country, society, community, people, and culture shapes their identity. In this sense, they are different from the African American who is lost to this important context. They believe that the African American craves a sense of historical attachment to specific African cultural domains but is seemingly frustrated by his “rootlessness” as a result of which he increasingly comes to despise and resent the African immigrant, whose history he romanticizes. Constructing the identity of the immigrant is in part possible because Nyibol has classified other Black people as African Americans or different. Therefore, drawing boundaries around characteristics of “sameness” and thus “belonging” necessarily involves excluding or creating identities of “non-belonging” for others, thereby alienating them. This means that the ethnic identity that is constructed is always in danger of being destabilized, subverted, or supplanted by what it is not or what it does not embrace such as the African American identity or Black identity. The immigrant identity becomes a sort of hybrid identity that exists temporarily to fill the gap created by the tension between the ethnic-self and the new racial-self in the United States. While this enables the immigrant evade or minimize the negativity and diminished opportunities associated with being Black, the African American sees the construction and maintenance of the immigrant identity as the repudiation of blackness and in essence the repudiation of the African American – a negation that must be challenged. It would appear, however, that what should be challenged is not blackness per se or resistance to blackness, but the ongoing structural reification of Whiteness that continues to disadvantage Blacks in the United States.

## Americanization

While the acquisition of ethnic identity is often accomplished through socialization in one's home culture, the retention of that identity may be challenged by experiences in a new sociocultural environment in the process of acculturation, which in the context of the United States is Americanization. Huebner (1906) defines *Americanization* as “assimilation in the United States.” The term was initially used to describe activities that were designed to prepare foreign-born residents of the United States for full participation in citizenship (Graham & Koed, 1993). The aim was not merely the achievement of citizenship, but the actual inculcation in the immigrant of the American economic, social, and moral standard of life. This process of inculcation, at its completion,

transforms the immigrant from “otherness” to “Americanness” in that he understands, accepts, and is committed to the principles of American life.

In the U.S., the immigrant experiences a range of pressures to become American. Like other immigrants before him, he becomes a product of the assimilation of many different cultures or nationalities, which have been carefully blended into the American cultural reality with its rigidly ordered classification and categorization systems. He begins to think and act together with others as an American. This dynamic is captured by the metaphor of the “melting pot,” an American symbolism that implies the blending of multiple cultures to produce the uniquely American. However, as Huebner (1906) argues, to “think and act together” does not imply or even necessitate that race ties are wholly lost or that the new immigrant is immune from the social and political valuation of races in the United States; rather, to “think and act together” in most cases involves maintaining exclusive settlements with other people of one's race. For instance, Blacks often mass together in poor, underserved communities. Jews, Italians, Bohemians, and Scandinavians also often settle in exclusive settlements. These settlements, irrespective of the race of the settlers, are Americanized in as much as the immigrants that inhabit them learn to think and act like Americans. According to Huebner (1906), to “think and act together” may also mean the actual “uniting of minds and activities” of the immigrant with those of Americans through sustained physical interaction. For African immigrants, the expectation is that he must unite in mind and activities with the African American as a way to assert his Americanness. In this sense, he becomes first and foremost, African American and through this assumed identity, he becomes legible as an American, which confers the expectations, responsibilities, and opportunities of the African American, and not much else.

African immigrants are in subtle and not so subtle ways challenging this reality. They seek the definition of Americanization that European immigrants have, which in its broadest usage is a euphemism for Whiteness and until recently Catholicism. Whiteness is highly valued and is represented at the microlevel by middle class values. Many African immigrants have come to place high premiums on these values and actively seek to achieve them. Yet, even with this definition, Americanization involves much more than expectations transferring middle class White culture and benefits to African immigrants. It is also directed toward the modification or alteration of the concrete values and beliefs of the immigrant such as the commitment toward individualistic ideals versus a collective, social, or interdependent orientation. The effect of this is that the African immigrant experiences the interaction of contradictory forces, the pressure to become American by shedding his “otherness” and to adapt America to the full force of his history. For the African immigrant unlike their European counterparts, this process is intensely laborious and stressful.

Americanization is almost a painless process for European migrants especially as it involves mainly “being White.” The fact of Whiteness opens the full range of resources and opportunities and unlocks the creative potentials of the European migrant. For the African immigrant, “being White” is not an option; instead, he is expected to “be African American.” Yet, the African American because of his history with slavery, segregation, and discrimination is a disadvantaged entity, often lacking the social, cultural, political and economic capital needed to live the good “American life.” In reaction to this, African immigrants may choose to “act White,” where he becomes a caricature, a perverse contraption that is pilloried by the African American who increasingly sees him or her as not only superfluous but also a contraption impelled by the same divisive forces that have historically diminished his/her existence.

Evidence from the data suggests that respondents continue to struggle with the idea of blackness. Because of the negativity that surrounds America’s Blacks, blackness remains a highly contested identity. To combat this negativity, some African immigrants go to extremes to project different images and identities, including skin bleaching. According to Ngozi, an immigrant from Nigeria,

There are many Africans that I know who refuse to be Black in this country. They spend a lot of money on their own appearance. Some have become lighter, because they bleach their skin. They don’t care about the long-term effect of bleaching. All they care about is acceptance by Whites. That is why most of their friends are also White.

Skin bleaching is just one of several strategies by which African immigrants contest “blackness” in America. They also adapt through residence in White neighborhoods, intermarriages, labor force participation, and by other overt and covert forms of resistance to the African American historical reality. Residence in predominantly White neighborhoods, for example, has resulted in some type of residential segregation between African immigrants and African Americans. According to Ekpe, another immigrant from Nigeria,

The greatest mistake any African can make is to live among these Black people. If they try that, then, they will remain poor for a long time unless there is divine intervention. The value of the property instead of appreciating will depreciate. I did not come to America to look at the bridge. I came to make enough money to support myself and my family back home in Nigeria. I sold my property in Nigeria and deprive myself here to be able to afford the down payment of my home in a White neighborhood where the property value will always appreciate. I have nothing personal against the African American. This is about survival.

Unlike Ekpe, many African Americans are trapped in poor Black neighborhoods because of the discriminatory lending practices of institutions controlled by Whites as well as institutional policies and practices that historically have

privileged Whites. For example, they often lack the hereditary wealth transfers (from parents and grandparents who benefitted from racial land distribution policies and other wealth transfers that enabled them accumulate wealth) that accrue to young White home owners and are trapped in low income occupations, which makes it difficult to purchase homes in the more affluent neighborhoods (see Horton & Thomas, 1998; Jackman&Jackman, 1980; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Shapiro, 2004). This is not often the case with many African immigrants. Because many of the African immigrants who come to the United States voluntarily are highly educated professionals, they are easily accepted by Whites and are often able to afford the down payments on their homes with wealth transfer from their countries of origin. Moreover, because of their educational qualifications, which are often paid for by their various governments, they are not constrained by debt burdens such as educational loans like Blacks in the U.S. and are thus able to do well more quickly. More importantly, they do not have any personal connections to the challenges that African Americans historically have faced in the United States and therefore do not have any “chips” on their shoulders described as the “angry Black syndrome” (see Carter, Pieterse, & Smith III, 2008; Harvey Wingfield, & Feagin, 2009; Wade 2006).

By accommodating the African immigrant, a Black man, African Americans believe that White America attempts to purge itself of the guilt of racism and discrimination. While this may forge a relationship between the African immigrant and Whites, it drives a wedge in the relationship between the African immigrant and the African American, who feels betrayed by the seeming camaraderie between the African immigrant and Whites. According to ABM, an African immigrant,

What am I? An African? An immigrant? An American? I am all of these although the African American rejects me because I cannot help his cause and Americans reject me because I am not White. I guess that I am a human being caught in the middle of a hostile race war.

In any case, the relationship that is forged between African immigrants and Whites is decidedly unequal and exploitative, and the African immigrant becomes a tool for showcasing the significant racial advance that America has made while in reality, Blacks continue to experience discrimination in all facets of life in the United States. For many African immigrants like ABM, the process of becoming American is difficult and painful. Americanization does not appear to confer rights beyond enforced obligations and acquiescence to the label “African American,” which apart from being a material fact with economic consequences is also an ideological concept with a very pejorative connotation. It is this intensely discriminatory ideological import, which translates into negative social and economic conditions that is being challenged by the intra-Black conflict, not the physical fact



of blackness. In this sense, African immigrants and African Americans are engaged in a conflict that they did not author and neither of them knows the ends or aims of the practices and principles that have pitched them as opponents instead of collaborators.

## Resource Deprivation

One theme that resonated strongly in this study is the idea of resource deprivation. At the broadest level, the greater the competition for scarce economic and social opportunities amongst both groups of Black people, the greater their hostility toward one another. However, hostility due to struggle over scarce economic and social resources is not restricted to Blacks in the United States; instead, tension over economic opportunities spread to other racial categories (including Whites, Latinos/Latinas, Asians, etc.). Resource contestation occurs along several dimensions including struggle for cultural, political, and economic resources. For example, at the level of culture, Nsan argues that,

In America, blackness simply means African American. I am not African American. I am from Kenya. I value my culture but America wants me to repudiate that culture and assume the culture of the African American. If you ask me, that's no culture at all.

For many African immigrants, their forced categorization as African Americans gives the African American immense cultural power over them. They believe that it is a systemic advantage that confers enormous benefits to the African American within the Black culture complex as well as the racial "others" who ultimately benefits from this blanket categorization. This cost-benefit analysis is not entirely unprecedented in history. One of the most effective means by which Whiteness and all of its cultural appurtenances became the preeminent racial category was the conscious devaluation of all other racial categories. For example, colonialism was legitimated as efforts to civilize inferior races. In his 1965 book the *Dual Mandate*, Lord Lugard, the first British Governor-General of Nigeria argued that Europe was in Africa to civilize Africans. Lugard and the other colonialists believed that Africans had inferior cultural forms and needed to be civilized. The imposition of White cultural hegemony was a first step in forcing pre-colonial African states to open up their resources to plunder by Europeans. Also, during the dark days of the slave trade and the many decades of segregation and racism in America, Blacks were considered subhuman, atavistic, primitive, and inferior. Even after slavery ended, the intellectual capacity and cultural adequacy of Black people were still frequently questioned. Lewis Terman (1916) in *The Measurement of Intelligence* argued that,

(Black children) are uneducable beyond the nearest rudiments of training . . . There is no possibility at present of convincing

society that they should not be allowed to reproduce, although from a eugenic point of view they constitute a grave problem because of their unusual prolific breeding.

All of these ideas permitted their mistreatment, which stripped them of all indigenous cultural expressions except those that appeared to legitimate their inferior positions and that permitted the frenzied development of cultural deficit theories, which continues to influence White opposition to Affirmative Action (see Mattei, 2004; Murray, 1984; Schwartz, 2003; Steele, 1990; Williams, 2003; Wilson, 1980, 1978; Wolf, 1993). In the early 19th century, Asians, especially the Chinese were also subjected to these types of cultural assaults when they were labeled the "yellow peril" or "yellow terror," a metaphor for racism against Chinese immigrants in the United States (Rupert, 1911). The creation of the quasi-permanent immigrant identity became the ideological tool to resist their forced immersion into the African American culture with its negative historical referent and consequences.

However, the competition over resources between African immigrants and African Americans is fiercest at the level of competition for economic access. Economic competition among ethnic groups has long been considered an explanation for intergroup tensions and hostilities (Bonacich, 1972, 1976; Cummings, 1977, 1980; Cummings & Lambert, 1997; Forbes, 1997; Olzak, 1989, 1992). Such discord might be avoided except that the competition among low-skilled and unskilled laborers in the U.S. economic landscape becomes a zero-sum game (Morris & Gimpel, 2007) where success is territorialized, resulting in part from where the competition takes place relative to where employment is most readily available. This, perhaps, is what Holzer (1996) calls the mismatch between the geography of the low-skill workforce and the geography of employment. Immigrant populations are showing remarkable capacity for settling into locations other than their ports of entry (Logan, 2001; Morris & Gimpel, 2007; Suro & Singer, 2002). While African immigrants are still highly segregated from Whites in suburbia and cannot compare with White levels of residential mobility and income growth, they are better able to sidestep the residential isolation that impedes African American prosperity. For example, several African immigrant bloggers in this study believe that they are much more mobile - occupationally and geographically - than African Americans who they believe are sedentary and remain largely segregated from Whites and other racial populations. The mechanism for their isolation is, in part, sustained high levels of immigration into areas exhibiting high employment growth in the low-skill labor market (and adjoining areas) where employers commonly show a preference for African immigrants over African Americans. According to Adrian, a White blogger,

There is a big difference between the African immigrant and the African American. Where the African immigrant is polite,



self-conscious, thoughtful, hardworking, and family oriented, the African American is brusque, sourly, always vexed, angry, lazy, belligerent, and lack family commitment. At work, the African immigrant is all about getting the job done, while the African American is all about avoiding the job. If I have a choice about their employment, I will choose the African immigrant any day over the African American.

The sustained flow of African immigrants directly into or adjacent historically Black environments with little economic opportunities raise questions about whether competition between groups for scarce resources erupts into frustration and violence (Baldassare, 1994; Morris & Gimpel, 2007) or at the very least, feelings of contempt for rival groups (Kaufmann, 2006). The high levels of poverty and unemployment in many big city Black neighborhoods is cause to believe that the pressures caused by sustained high levels of immigration into these areas might lead to social strains within a community. More importantly, at the bottom rung of the socioeconomic hierarchy, one might expect that competition between African immigrants, as well as with other non-White immigrant populations, might be so fierce as to produce resentment, high levels of social disorder (Johnson, Farrell, & Quinn, 1999), psychological stress, and even higher levels of mortality (LeClere, Rogers, & Peters, 1997).

Mounting evidence suggest that African Americans are increasingly becoming anxious, frustrated, and bitter because of their economic dislocation, which they blame on high levels of illegal immigration (Borjas, 1998, 2001; Morris & Gimpel, 2007; Stevans, 1998). Although the average impact of immigration on an entire population may be slight, the community effects may be overwhelming for populations at the bottom. Even where it is contended that mass immigration is a net economic benefit to society, the costs, however, are borne disproportionately by those at the lower socioeconomic strata, particularly African Americans, while the benefits accrue at the top of the socioeconomic and racial hierarchy (Borjas, 2001; Morris & Gimpel, 2007). For example, Dante, a self-identified African American blogger is irked by the fact that immigrants who come to the United States appear to move up faster than the average African American. According to him,

The speed by which they do well is amazing. It leaves you wondering what you are doing wrong or not doing well. They come here and in a space of 2 years own their own home, car, business and family. I have much less than the African who came only yesterday. Men, this is sad, sad, sad.

The logical conclusion drawn by many African Americans from their commonplace observations of immigrant's upward mobility is that American society continues to prefer immigrants to native-born Blacks, just as happened in the past where European and Asian immigrants were preferred to

African Americans. If America's immigration policy had not become too foreigner friendly, African Americans might be able to access some of the resources, opportunities, and rewards that these immigrant populations tap into. Thus, business opportunities, home ownership, and other employment benefits may be more open to African Americans were it not for the fact that their niches in the labor force have been hijacked and monopolized by immigrants (Morris & Gimpel, 2007; Waldinger, 2001).

This point is crucial especially considering continuing debate among social scientists about various economic indicators for evaluating whether the low-skill labor market is a zero-sum game (Lim, 2001). For example, researchers working with disadvantaged groups suggest that minorities believe that as one group gains, another loses, and that one group's misfortune becomes another's opportunity (Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Ha, 2010; Morris & Gimpel, 2007; Nelson & Perez-Monforti, 2006). This idea is salient in following observation by Sempefeme, a self-identified African American blogger, that,

African immigrants have no business in this country. What do they contribute? Nothing. They eat where they have not sown. Where were they when we worked the farms, had the letter S branded on our foreheads, denied the right to education, speech, vote, and live a decent life? They come only to prevent us from attaining our potential. Yes, they are a good-for-nothing bunch of parasites.

Several other African American respondents shared Sempefeme's view. They characterized the African immigrant as "opportunistic," "money-conscious," "savvy," and "cunny." They say that African immigrants come to the United States not with the intent to contribute toward the development of local American communities but to "repatriate" or "remit" money back to Africa. In this manner, the African immigrant is characterized as half-hearted in their commitment to America, which suggests that they can never be Americanized. More importantly, through his proximity to White America, the African immigrant deprives the African American of much of the resources he needs to advance himself including the ability to accumulate wealth, occupy positions of prestige at work and in business, and scholarships and awards at local schools.

Regarding the African immigrant's tendency to prosper quickly in America, one African American blogger describes it as "betrayal." According to this blogger,

African immigrants have betrayed us because they now have economic access and they haven't reached out to us. They do not support Affirmative Action and yet they are the biggest beneficiaries of Affirmative Action. They gain from schooling, housing, work, women . . . the whole nine yards. They caught us by surprise. No one told us they were coming, what they were about, or why they were here.

Similarly, African Americans worry that the influx of African immigrants into predominantly Black neighborhoods and their unwillingness to remain there long enough to contribute substance to these communities, has the potential to devalue their estate even if the reality is far more complex. African immigrants, however, insist that their presence in the American socioeconomic space does not undermine African American opportunities; rather, it should help speed up growth and development and enhance the prestige and wellbeing of the African American. By attacking their businesses and lifestyle, the African American is holding himself or herself out as antagonistic to the progress and wellbeing of the African immigrant, a Black man. According to Nkanga,

When you come into a new country, it's like being born. You don't know the language, the culture, the country. Since they (African Americans) are Black and they have lived in this country before we got here, we thought they would guide us and tell us how to live in this country. Instead, what we got was attack after attack and lack of support.

African immigrants believe that African Americans deliberately create obstacles for them as they struggle through numerous first and second nature challenges and the resulting tensions and antagonisms make the development and expansion of a holistic Black social network, with all its potential advantages, impossible. According to Adam,

When we came here, we thought this was a peaceful land. We spent 4 years in a refugee camp before finally settling in Columbus. We were happy because we thought we could rely on Black Americans. We were wrong. They are trouble. We have already had enough trouble at home. We are trying to heal. We have no support from anybody, not even from Blacks like us. This is very bad. They say we have come to take their jobs and deprive them of their opportunities. It is very sad.

The above suggests that economic cleavages is at the center of the tensions and antagonisms between African immigrants and African Americans in the United States, specifically in how resources are evaluated, distributed, and appropriated.

## Discussion: Toward a Theory of Manipulative Deflection

A critical analysis of the relations between African Americans and African immigrants in the United States reveals that the conflict is a function of the ordering of social forces in the United States especially the broad system of racial categorization and signification. These forces ensure the internal fragmentation of the Black racial category through policies and actions that engage and activate members of this category as oppositional forces that must do battle to gain benefits that are freely available to other racial categories, especially Whites. More fundamentally, the conflict results

from their subjective experience of deprivation, which not only jeopardizes attempts to construct a holistic Black identity, but also makes it harder for both groups to forge a common understanding of history as a way to create a new sociohistorical trajectory that harnesses the capabilities of both groups for the socioeconomic development of the Black community. In essence, the conflict results from the manipulation of both groups by Whites using the divide to conquer strategy that was effective in the creation of White colonies in African states in the 19th and 20th centuries.

This theory of manipulative deflection suggests that intrarace conflict between Blacks in the United States originates primarily from socialization in a society where the culture of the Black minority is systematically torn apart and destroyed by the mainstream White culture in a manner that makes its recovery impossible. The piecemeal destruction of the values, belief systems, and systems of cultural and social adaptation and organization of Blacks in the U.S. was facilitated by the forces of slavery, colonialism, racism, segregation, and Americanization. This has produced mega identities such as the Black identity and mega narratives such as the ideology of blackness, which has pejorative connotations and can be contrasted with the "superior" ideology of Whiteness. The forced construction and legitimation of a single Black identity and the lumping together of people of color into that category without regard to their sociohistorical and cultural milieus was meant to produce lasting fissures among elements in that category. By bringing together inconsistent cognitive elements without creating clear behavioral and historical assertions (see Ijomah, 1988), Whites ensured that there would always be tensions, hostilities, and conflict within the Black community. The manner in which the Black category was created has helped to maintain the hegemony of Whiteness at the same time that it leaves a wound in the Black community that has deepened with lack of social, economic, and political opportunities.

This conflict and the forces that created and enabled it is not only a problem of structure; it is also a problem of agency. Race in the United States is a dominant social structure that provides immense signification to other powerful structures and systems of values including capitalism, democracy, justice, politics, health care, etc. Race is the chemical power that drives these other structures and is powerful enough to create, recreate, and modify these and other social structures. Yet, the structure of race and the other structures that it affects do not create themselves. They are brought about by the actions and inactions of people or human agents working by themselves or in concert with other individuals and collectivities. The effects of these structures are also felt most directly by the individuals in society that have the least ability to resist them especially Blacks. For example, the system of race determines the allocation of social, political, and economic opportunities in the United States. Race, to a large extent, determines who gets what, how, and when. Home ownership, employment, entrepreneurship, education, and

political access are all allocated in unequal measures on the basis of racial categorization and or proximity to the dominant racial categories.

While African Americans through the legacy of past discrimination are thrust primarily into a system of forced dependence such as welfare and negative self-feelings, African immigrants are coerced into accepting a culture and history that in all material aspects controverts their histories as well as cultural understandings of their place in history. In this manner, the American racial system promotes powerful forces for identification with the oppressor and ambivalence and antagonism toward oneself and group. Because African immigrants and African Americans are often shut out of the social and economic mainstream, they become frustrated and angry, turning within for support. This introspection, instead of revealing the true nature of the problem, exacerbates the tension, forcing Blacks to attack other Blacks that are as much victims as themselves.

## Conclusion

The data suggest growing conflict between African immigrants and African Americans in the United States. There appears to be three important areas of disagreement. The first plays out as contestation over identity. Here, the stereotype is of the African immigrant as culturally intended because of his or her cultural experiences in Africa. Mainstream America, therefore, perceives the African immigrant as having a concrete identity structure, which the African American lacks by virtue of his historical experiences with slavery and segregation. More fundamentally, mainstream America does not perceive the African immigrant as a threat; instead, s/he is actively conscripted, for purely polemical reasons, as a partner in the struggle to recreate a postracial America. It is much easier to preach the gospel of color blindness to a population with no personal or emotional connection to past racial oppression than to a population whose entire historical milieu is based in racial oppression and resistance to racial oppression. Perhaps, the election of President Barack Obama tells the story of the affinity between Whites and African immigrants. President Obama's father was a Kenyan immigrant and his mother was White. Would America have made him president otherwise?

The second motion intersects the first and it concerns mechanisms for the sociocultural adaptation of Blacks, especially immigrants to the American way of life. In a study of political challenges facing African Americans in the United States, O'Sullivan (2004) observed that the United States has a "concept of Americanization in which immigrants with strong work ethics are somehow more 'American' than unemployed Black fellow citizens." Morrison (1993) observes that historically, there has been a false conscientization of the African American to the idea that he is Black and therefore alien and non-American. This false representation of the African American affects his identity formation and

transfers to the African immigrant who feels challenged by the complexities that surround America's racial structure. In fact, Olneck (1989) in a study of immigrant children observed that African immigrant children develop a sense of ethnic identity from a combination of fighting to retain elements of their native culture in the process of becoming Americans. With the negative stereotype of the African American, these kids maintain distance from African American kids and in turn, receive little or no support from them. Moreover, many Whites have the tendency to treat Black immigrants as a "model minority" within a troublesome native-born Black population. O'Sullivan (2004) argues that a good proportion of immigrants tend to be better educated than African Americans (or place higher premiums on education), do not appear to have the "chip of racial resentment" on their shoulders, and exhibit the classic immigrant optimism about assimilating into the mainstream culture. And because these stereotypes often result in employment and education opportunities for African immigrants and their children, they also feed tensions between African immigrants and African Americans.

The third motion intersects the first and second and suggests that resource competition feeds the conflict between African immigrants and African Americans in the United States. Corcoran and Adams (1997) and Sanders (1988) argue that racism shuts out Black people from certain economic opportunities and produces numerous economic and social emergencies in the Black community. Struggle to access and control the few economic opportunities available to the Black community has pitted African immigrants against African Americans. This struggle is worsened by the global economic meltdown that has created few economic opportunities at the same time that it motivates well-educated Africans to migrate to the United States in search of greener pastures. The data suggest that hostility between African Americans and African immigrants deepen at the level of economic competition and perception of deprivation. Thus, definite lines of confrontation are drawn not simply by claims of ethnic differences and difficulties in social adaptation to the American way of life, but often, when they intersect economic pressures.

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