

Becoming African Americans: African Immigrant Youth in the United States and Hybrid Assimilation

by

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Abstract

This article examines the identity choices of African immigrant youth in a pan-African church in a small U.S. city, illuminating their struggle to define themselves within oversimplified U.S. racial categories that label them as a person of African origins ('black') and African American. First, it argues that segmented assimilation (the concept frequently used to explain how non-white immigrant youth are incorporated into U.S. society) does not sufficiently address how these young people create hybrid identities at the intersection of their racial, ethnic, class, and religious identities. Secondly, it suggests that immigrant youth, particularly those living in smaller U.S. cities, regularly cross, reinforce, and blur social boundaries among a range of social groups in a process better described as hybrid assimilation, which often causes feelings of identity confusion as well as opportunities for daily navigating, contesting, and adding new meaning to an African American identity.

Key Words: Hybrid Assimilation; Segmented Assimilation; Race; Ethnicity; Identity; African Immigrants; African Americans

After asking Rebecca (age 14) a series of questions about her family background and friendships, we asked how she prefers to identify herself. "I am an African," she answered haltingly with a question in her voice, "but more American than African, 'cause, like, I was born there and all, but I don't, like, know all about it. Like, I'm not fully African, but I guess the fact that I was born there – I don't know, it's confusing." Rebecca came to the US as a baby and does not speak her parents' languages, nor does she remember their homeland. Nevertheless, being an American is complicated for her as well: "In a group of my black friends, I'd be the white girl.... And then with my white friends, I'd be the black one, so [laughing], I guess I'm just in the middle." Rebecca, who has a lovely, brown complexion and is not biracial, is variously regarded as culturally too white, too black, and too African, as well as not white, black or African enough depending on the context. She concluded, "I'm not ever gonna be fully American, but then again I'm not gonna be fully African. Like, I'm just gonna be there in between and working at it."

In this article, I examine the process of identity formation undertaken by youth like Rebecca with recent African origins who are members of St. Augustine Lutheran Church in the small US city of Fort Wayne, Indiana. St. Augustine is an intentionally pan-African congregation of 75-100 immigrants from 17 African countries, and thus church families have cultures, languages, and histories that differ from native-born African Americans. Meanwhile, the church's youth also typically lack a foreign accent and strong ties to their parents' homelands. As a result, they often struggle to define themselves within oversimplified US racial categories that label them as a person of African origins ('black') and African American. In the 1980s, civil rights leaders and presidential candidate Jesse Jackson in particular popularized the use of the term "African American" to describe the descendants of African slaves who have lived in the US for generations (Smith 1992), which is how I will use the term in this article.¹ However, as growing numbers of people with African origins who are immigrant youth come of age in the US, how are they responding to a racialization process that links them to the African American descendants? Are they becoming African American, which is the category, ascribed to them? Where exactly do the children of African immigrants fit within US society? These youth represent hidden diversity in the US that needs to be better understood.

The critical role of race in immigrant incorporation has been well examined, particularly among West Indians in large metropolitan areas like New York and Miami who are also closely identified with African Americans (Stepick 1998; Waters 1999; Foner 2001). These studies have important parallels with the emerging literature on people from Africa who represent a newer immigration stream (Chacko 2003; Clark 2009; Awokoya 2012; Reynolds 2012; Habecker 2012; Halter and Johnson 2014). For example, the research shows that both first-generation West Indian and African immigrants often resist racial identification with African Americans. Arriving with well-developed ethnic and national identities, these immigrants perceive African Americans as overly preoccupied with racial issues. However, their children (that is the 1.5 generation who come to the US as children and the second-generation who are born in the US) feel greater pressure to social identify as African American. Stepick (1998) illuminates distinctions between Haitian youth known as "just comes" whose speech and dress reveal their foreign-ness versus "cover-ups" who want to pass as African Americans. He explains that prejudice and discrimination against Haitians pushes many of these youth to become "cover-ups." Likewise, Awokoya (2012:100) addresses how Nigerian immigrant youth seek to distance themselves from negative media images of African people as "ignorant, poverty-stricken, and uncivilized" and feel social pressure to ally themselves with African Americans. Meanwhile, they also feel parental pressure to maintain their cultural heritage and avoid identification with negative stereotypes of African Americans as "lazy, prone to criminality, and lacking familial ties."

The West Indian studies generally conclude that people of African origins ('black') who are immigrant youth experience a process of segmented assimilation. This concept, originally developed by Portes and Zhou (1993), suggests that non-white immigrants groups became part of two (or possibly three) main segments of U.S. society based on the socio-economic resources they bring and the context of their reception.

First, those from families with limited socio-economic prospects end up worse off by identifying with the African American underclass in inner city neighborhoods. Secondly, youth from families with more social and economic resources are more likely to succeed by maintaining an ethnic identity within the context of a strong, supportive ethnic community. A third option would be to assimilate into the white, mainstream, middle class as European immigrants in the early 1900s were said to have done, but this trajectory is typically not considered for people of African origins ('black') who are immigrants because of their race. While the segmented assimilation concept has evolved and become more nuanced over the last twenty years, it remains "the most important and the most controversial idea" explaining how non-white immigrants are being incorporated into US society since pivotal immigration reforms in 1965 (Stepick and Stepick 2010).

Nevertheless, African immigrants are more likely than West Indians to live in smaller US cities like Fort Wayne, which has important implications for their children's patterns of incorporation into US society that have not been sufficiently addressed.² While 90 percent of West Indian immigrants live in the Northeast and Florida, a third of people from Africa are scattered across the Midwest and Western states (Kent 2007:14). As a result, African immigrants are less likely than West Indians to live in segregated inner city communities and more likely to live in smaller, more economically diverse places like Fort Wayne (as in this case study). Their immigrant communities are also much smaller and more likely to organize around a pan-African identity (Hume 2008; McComb 2014). Thus, African immigrant youth in Fort Wayne were constantly navigated overlapping social groups, which included various ethnicities within their parents' nationality, various African nationalities worshipping together at St. Augustine, other immigrant groups, as well as black and white Americans. Their world is not comprised of just two segments (one ethnic and the other African American) from which they have to choose. Instead, they face a myriad of daily identity choices among a whole range of groups that are also divided by class and religious boundaries.

In more recent years, scholars have begun to reject "the hegemony of assimilation," to use Lamphere's (2016) phrase. Rather than dichotomously categorizing the identity choices of immigrant youth into American versus ethnic, these studies explore the bicultural, dual, and hybrid nature of immigrant youth identities – even in large metropolitan areas. For example, Kasinitz and his colleagues (2008) challenge the segmented assimilation concept by showing that most non-white immigrant youth in their New York study do not fit into any of the three trajectories but instead claim a hybrid or hyphenated identity that integrates aspects of their parents' culture and American culture in helpful ways. Similarly, an edited volume by Nibbs and Brettell (2016) considers a variety of social spaces (including friendship networks, transnational spaces, and social media) that shape immigrant youth identities, enabling them to retain their cultural heritage while gaining acceptance in their host communities.

Building on these studies, this article does not seek to reject the segmented assimilation concept so much as to reframe it by examining the situational and hybrid nature of identity for African immigrant youth within one ethnic community in a small US city. The assimilation literature provides essential information on how structural factors and immigrants' human capital shape the diversity of immigrant youth experiences, which should not be discounted. However, what is missing from the concept is a greater understanding of how immigrant youth often navigate multiple segments of US society simultaneously and exercise agency in combining their home culture with the host culture. In addition, the segmented assimilation model risks categorizing all US minorities as lower class, which completely disregards the possibility that some might identify with middle-class African Americans as well as their ethnic community. Lastly, religious identities, which can matter more to people than racial and ethnic identities, can provide another avenue for assimilation. Therefore, I examine how African immigrant youth create hybrid identities at the intersections of their racial, ethnic, class, and religious identities.

Toward a Theory of Hybrid Assimilation

As the 21st century progresses, it is time to update the segmented assimilation concept with a more representative theory of hybrid assimilation, which considers the complex and often messy process of navigating multiple identities simultaneously. In the words of Stuart Hall (1992:310): "Everywhere, cultural identities are emerging which are not fixed, but poised, in transition, between different positions; which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time; and which are the product of those complicated crossovers and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalized world." Hybridity goes by many names, including biculturalism, multiculturalism, creolization, and *mestizaje* – all containing a sense of "cultural mixedness" (Bretell and Nibbs 2009:680). Pieterse (2001) explains that what makes hybridity complicated is not the mixing of cultures but rather boundaries which divide social groups and obscure those who are between them.

To explain how hybrid assimilation works, I draw on the old anthropological concept of ethnic boundaries developed by Frederick Barth (1969), adding racial, class, and religious boundaries to the discussion. In American popular perception, "ethnic groups" are typically defined by shared cultural attributes such as language, behavior, or ancestral origin (Waters 1999:45). However, Barth argued that ethnic groups are best understood not by the cultural content contained within a group, but rather the boundaries (or "socially relevant factors") used to differentiate "us" from "them." He also argued that it is entirely possible for individuals to adopt new behaviors and norms in order to change their group membership without actually challenging the boundary between groups. This membership change is what sociologists mean by assimilation, and individuals usually undertake this social transformation in order to access benefits made available by joining the new group. However, changing group membership is not so easy when it comes to race, which functions differently than ethnicity in the US because it is assigned to individuals based on shared physical attributes (e.g. skin color) and not chosen by them.

Nevertheless, Karyn Lacy's (2007) study of middle-class African Americans provides a useful guide for understanding how the children of African immigrants might simultaneously occupy more than one ethnic group and find ways to successfully navigate racial boundaries. Lacy argues that middle-class African Americans try to avoid or minimize the possibility of experiencing racial discrimination by cultivating "public identities" that reflect language, mannerisms, and clothing accepted among white people. They do this by "code-switching," a linguistic term researchers use to refer to the "temporary appropriation of mainstream language by members of minority groups," or "script-switching," which is a more expansive term that Lacy uses to include "temporarily taking on a whole new substitute set of social roles to perform" (91). Lacy describes script-switching as a two-dimensional process of boundary crossing for middle-class African Americans who seek to belong in the mainstream and in their minority subculture. I observed that script-switching can be far more complicated for African immigrant youth who take on three or more dimensions as they navigate acceptance and belonging among many groups, including white Americans, African Americans, other African people, and sometimes even other immigrant groups.

Thus, hybrid assimilation is perhaps best understood as a fluid process of creating new identities by merging together aspects of immigrant cultures with American cultures at the boundaries between social groups. This study reveals that children of African immigrants become experts at identifying these boundaries precisely because they constantly must decide whether or not to reinforce, cross, or blur these boundaries. As a result, they often experience identity confusion while navigating other people's expectations of who they are. The irony is that those engaged in hybrid assimilation may in fact not claim a hybrid identity at all. On one end of the spectrum, some may choose to hold more to their immigrant backgrounds, while on the other end of the spectrum, others may choose to be as American as possible. This does not necessarily indicate that they are now part of one segment or another of society. In fact, the same individual may end up identifying as more African or more American at different times, depending on their context and life stage. What all these individuals have in common is not necessarily that they are part of one segment of society over another, but that they are all deeply influenced by two or more social groups that shape who they are.

Methodology

My position as both an insider and an outsider to the St. Augustine Lutheran Church community greatly aided me in conducting this research. I am a member of another local Lutheran church, born in Nigeria, and raised in Liberia and Kenya as a white child of American missionaries. My African background and Lutheran affiliation opened doors for me to adult church members who warmly received me as an adopted "African sister" and curious anthropologist. Meanwhile, the youth were more open with me because they saw me as an outsider with whom they could speak anonymously about their experiences.

After conducting three exploratory meetings with church members, I worked collaboratively with two research assistants (both white women from Fort Wayne) utilizing participant observation methods at multiple Sunday-morning church services and Saturday-night youth group meetings to observe the community over a six-month period in 2013.

In addition, we conducted a combined total of 37 in-depth interviews (17 by me) with 13 adolescents, 14 young adults, and 10 parents, representing 20 church families. To ensure continuity of data, each of us used the same schedule of interview questions as a basic guide, adjusting it flexibly and adding follow-up questions as appropriate. The ethnographic material presented is not limited to these interviews (which were recorded, transcribed, and coded by theme), although they do provide the basis for understanding the diversity of backgrounds and experiences represented in the church as well as the various identifications of a significant portion of its youth (as I will collectively refer to all adolescent and young adult church members). Of the 27 youth interviewed, 17 were female and 10 were male. Four were born in the US (the “second-generation”), 16 were born in an African country but moved to the US by age 12 (the so-called “1.5 generation”), and the remaining seven arrived as teens.³ Two-parent families were the norm, and they originated from nine African countries, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Congo, South Africa, Sudan, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Angola. Almost all had lived in the US ten years or more – mostly in Fort Wayne. To protect confidentiality, I use only American pseudonyms to refer to research participants and do not refer to anyone by nationality, since this would be an obvious identifier.

The Church Community

St. Augustine provides an important window onto the ways in which the US is both shaping and being shaped by the arrival of increasing numbers of immigrants from Africa. Although people from Africa currently comprise only 4.4% of the total foreign-born population in the US, their numbers have roughly doubled every decade since 1970, reaching an estimated 1.8 million by 2013 (Anderson 2015). Three historical events occurred in the 1960s that contributed to this new migration stream: 1) the decolonization of Africa, which gave African people the opportunity to travel more freely, 2) the Civil Rights Movement, which made the US a more welcoming place for people of African origins (‘black’) who are immigrants, and 3) immigration reforms such as the Immigration Act of 1965, the Refugee Act of 1980, and diversity visa program, which opened up new avenues of immigration for African people to come to the US (Wilson and Habecker 2008). The people from Africa who voluntarily migrated to the US at this time were primarily students and diplomats, but they gradually diversified to include professionals as well as refugees. The US immigration system also prioritizes family reunification which has enabled the African population to rapidly expand in recent years.

Following the national trend, the number of people from Africa in Fort Wayne has more than doubled, from 384 in 2000 to 920 by 2013 (US-born children not included), according to 2011-2013 American Community Survey estimates. These newcomers have been incorporated into the city's total population of 253,691, which is 73.6% white, 15.4% black, 8% Hispanic, 3.3% Asian, with the remainder a mix of groups (US Census 2010). Fort Wayne is known for having the largest Burmese community in the US, which is the result of Catholic Charities' refugee resettlement initiative in the 1990s.⁴ A lesser known fact is that Catholic Charities also resettled a smaller number of African refugees in Fort Wayne during this time. In 1998, an African student studying at Fort Wayne's Lutheran seminary founded St. Augustine to meet the needs of the city's growing African refugee population. By 2001, the church became affiliated with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, which for a few years provided funding for a St. Augustine social services organization and scholarships for church youth attending area Lutheran schools. By 2008, the church received a second African pastor from the seminary and began attracting people from Africa who had moved from other US cities to Fort Wayne in order to pursue professional jobs or to be near family members, taking advantage of the city's lower cost of living relative to larger metropolitan areas.

With 75 to 100 members from 17 African countries, the church now represents a tremendous amount of cultural diversity as well socio-economic difference and reasons for migration to Fort Wayne. Community members regularly use the term "immigrant" to refer to themselves, but in reality this serves as a catch-all category that includes refugees, political asylees, diversity-visa winners, students, professionals, naturalized citizens, and their US-born children. Reflecting African immigrants' high education rates nationally, many church members are college educated with 17 of the 20 families represented having at least one parent with a college degree (or higher).⁵ However, not all benefit equally from this education, and those without college degrees are at an even greater disadvantage. Middle-class professionals worship alongside others who are not college-educated, work minimum-wage jobs, and struggle to make ends meet. In between is a large portion of the church that would be considered lower-middle-class by US standards. These people typically have foreign university degrees not recognized by US employers, so they have pursued what Halter and Johnson (2014) call "occupational detours," common among African immigrants. In other US cities, these detours include transportation services for men and nursing for women, and in Fort Wayne, many people from Africa (both male and female) work as Certified Nursing Assistants or as caregivers for the developmentally disabled (Whitsitt 2013). Half of the families in this study included at least one family member working in these occupations.

The role that immigrant churches play in helping its foreign-born members to redefine themselves in a new land has been well documented elsewhere (Olupona and Gemigani 2009), and at St. Augustine this new identity is proudly pan-African. Although services are conducted in English, which is spoken fluently by most, the congregation sings in multiple African languages accompanied by African drums.

Several parents wear African clothing to services, birthdays and anniversaries are regularly celebrated with delicious buffets of various African foods, and young people respectfully refer to their elders as “auntie” or “uncle” regardless of biological relationship. These are some of the ways the church defines and enacts an African identity that all are invited to share.

The questions to consider here are what the church means to its young people, especially since they live, go to school, and work in neighborhoods dispersed all over the city of Fort Wayne. Up until 2015, St. Augustine was located in a building purchased by church members located in the southeast quadrant of Fort Wayne, which also has the city’s highest crime and poverty rates (Resink and Davis 2010).⁶ While some people from Africa live in this part of town, not many attend St. Augustine. Instead, all but one adolescent interviewed lived in safer neighborhoods (some renting modest apartments and others owning large, middle-class homes) in other parts of the city and attended more racially diverse public schools or the predominantly white Lutheran schools in town.

Navigating Group Boundaries

Although tremendous ethnic diversity exists among foreign-born people from Africa, these pre-migration ethnic boundaries are less prominent among the children of Africans in the Fort Wayne context. None of the St. Augustine youth felt any strong attachment to their parents’ ethnic identity as defined in their homelands (for example, Yoruba or Igbo in Nigeria). Most only referred to these identities in relation to their parents’ languages, although a few spoke disparagingly about African ethnic groups as the source of fruitless “tribalism.” National identity played a more significant role in their self-identifications, but most saw a national identity as interchangeable with an African one that is more recognizable to many Americans and regularly celebrated at St. Augustine. The far clearer and more significant ethnic boundary with which they contend is the boundary between people from Africa and African Americans. When we asked our respondents what people from Africa and African Americans share in common, their most frequent response was “skin color” and nothing else.

Skin color matters a great deal in the US, and the racial boundary between blacks and whites is historically and bureaucratically fixed with significant social ramifications. The majority (19) of the youth interviewed clearly identified experiences or attitudes they had encountered as racially discriminatory. Some of these experiences included being called “nigger” or “boy,” being followed in stores, or being denied access to services because of their race. Some St. Augustine parents also expressed concern about the effects of racialization on their children, particularly the boys. One father said, “It’s the stereotypes that tie them to being African American that worry me. Not so much for my girls, but for my son. The statistics show that he has a very high chance of being stopped by the police.” Underlining these concerns, he said that church elders have met with the youth group from time to time to “sensitize them” and advise them to avoid risky situations where “things are breaking out” and being a person of African origins (‘black’) is a liability.

The gendered nature of African immigrant youth identities corresponds closely to what Mary Waters (1999) found among West Indian youth. African and West Indian parents tend to monitor the activities of their daughters much more than their sons. As a result, girls are typically more concerned about accessing freedom from their parents' strict control (Habecker 2016). For example, Mariam (age 23) struggled to make decisions about her life even into young adulthood. "It's never really a choice with my father," she said. "I am still struggling with [my father's] cultural settings, what he wants culturally, and me being who I want to be." However, Waters notes, "boys face a more violent environment than do the girls because of the differential effects of American racism (317)." In a similar vein, several St. Augustine boys said they had been suspended from school for fighting, or they had had run-ins with the police. In February 2016, three African young men (one from the St. Augustine community) were tragically shot in a triple homicide in a southeast neighborhood, underscoring the dangers these young men potentially face. The media originally reported that the three were African Muslims and speculated that the shooting was a religious hate crime (Fisher 2016). Later reports correctly identified one of the three as a Christian and noted that police had ruled out the possibility of a religious motivation. As of this writing, no further media attention has been given to the shooting, raising questions about which "black lives matter" and why.

Despite these realities, none viewed their race as a hindrance to success in the US. Several youth noted in interviews that white people often treat them better upon learning of their foreign origins, highlighting the advantages of resisting identification with African Americans. For example, according to Beth (age 16), white people who mistake her as African American seem to "think I'm stupid, and I'm illiterate and all that stuff. And I have a baby daddy or something." By contrast, "white people treat me like I'm interesting when they find out I'm African," she said. Similarly, Rose (age 35) explained that she dislikes it when white people treat her like an "acceptable black," trying to make her feel like she is one of them and not like "those African Americans."

While immigrants of African origins ('black') try to differentiate themselves from African Americans may indicate a refusal to become American and a decision to remain ethnic, the children of immigrants may exhibit similar behavior strategically with different implications. Some St. Augustine youth did indeed work very hard to differentiate themselves from African Americans, but more as a way to maximize their preferred status among whites than to avoid Americanization. For example, Martha (age 26) came to the US at age 3 and can easily blend into her American world, but she enjoys being the "exotic girl." She often tells people she is [her nationality], and she does things like wear African clothes for an entire week to work. She finds that white people have many questions about her background, whereas "if I was just African American, that's boring." Rachel (age 13) also holds tightly to an "African" identity for similar reasons: "If I [say I'm] African American, they automatically assume that I am the same as anyone else on the street. But if I [say I'm] African, it sets me apart from everybody else."

So it, like, makes me unique in the pile.” At the same time, both of these young women are just as happy to act like Americans when blending in is more advantageous. Karyn Lacy (2007) describes how middle-class African Americans employ a similar strategy, using certain clothing, mannerisms, and speech to differentiate themselves from lower-class African Americans in order to put white people at ease. She calls this “exclusionary boundary work,” which can be used strategically and does not necessarily imply that one has opted out of being American.

Exclusionary boundary work can go both ways, however. Some African immigrant youth are simply unable, try as they might, to acquire the cultural competency required to blend in among African Americans, usually because they arrived as teens and found the language and cultural barriers insurmountable. Edwin (age 24) remembers wearing a button-up shirt, khaki pants, and nice leather shoes on his first day of school in the US as a 15-year-old. As a “just-come” (Stepick’s 1998), he realized he did not look “right,” and soon changed his appearance to blend in. He started listening to hip-hop, grew his hair long, and wore oversized clothes and sagging pants. He focused all his energy on mastering the English language and paid little attention to his grades, much to his parents’ dismay. “As you can tell, I was trying to fit in with the African American society,” he said. However, his strategy did not work. The African Americans “saw through me,” he said. His closest friends became other second-generation immigrants from a variety of countries who were also “trying to fit in with the hip-hop culture,” he said. For Edwin, this was a phase that he outgrew. He eventually graduated from college, cut his hair short, and bought clothes that fit him better. He feels a greater connection with middle-class African Americans now and dreams of returning to his African homeland one day to “make a difference” there. A few other adolescent boys in the youth group appeared to be engaged in Edwin’s high school experiment, but how their identity choices will impact their future remains to be seen.

According to church community reports, the African immigrant youth in Fort Wayne who are most likely to be expelled from school or to be arrested for criminal activity are poorly integrated into African American peer groups, spending most of their time with other second-generation immigrants instead. They are typically male, live in low-income areas, and have parents with limited English and education. Thomas (age 15), who fit this description and has been expelled from school, offered a window onto this group. Exhibiting what scholars call “an adversarial stance,” Thomas, who always dressed in hip-hop style, was often disruptive in youth group, although he agreed to be interviewed, much to my surprise. He was not particularly forthcoming about himself, although he did say, “I want to fit in with Americans, but in America, they’re still stuck in that stage, wanting me to meet their standards.” He did not specify which Americans or what stage and standards he meant, but he clearly expressed his feelings of inadequacy and even alienation within American society.

In Fort Wayne, African immigrant youth like Thomas are not assimilating into native minority groups as the segmented assimilation concept would suggest. In some ways, their hybridity makes their situation worse, because they are neither fully African nor fully African American. They are caught up in the problems of “the abandoned” African American lower class, to use Robinson’s (2010) term, but as the children of immigrants. The rise of organized African immigrant youth gangs in other US cities such as Seattle (Castro 2006) and Omaha (Ensor 2015) demonstrates that this problem is even more entrenched in other places. These examples also suggest that quantitative factors such as low graduation rates, low family incomes, and high incarceration rates often used to indicate proof of assimilation into underclass American minority communities (Portes et. al. 2005) may not actually correlate with people’s self-identifications.

Other St. Augustine youth noted that even if they wanted to blend in among African Americans, they had difficulty doing so because of their physical characteristics. For example, all the Ethiopians reported that Americans did not see them as African American, but rather asked if they were Indian, Middle Eastern, or South American (see also Habecker 2012). In most cases, they responded by correcting people – some saying, I am “Ethiopian” or “Ethiopian American,” and others insisting they had a legitimate claim to an “African American” identity despite the misidentifications. One biracial individual said she was similarly misidentified by Americans and responded by claiming to be “Halffrican” (“half African”). Meanwhile, the dark-skinned Sudanese commented that Americans did not see them as anything other than African no matter how they presented themselves.

Nevertheless, several St. Augustine youth said they identified with middle-class African Americans, and their experiences illustrate how they, like middle-class African Americans, are also using “script-switching” to navigate multiple racial and class groups. The situational use of language provides an easy way to understand how this works. Among those interviewed, only those arriving in the US after age 8 still spoke a homeland language (or languages) fluently, with the exception of one US-born person. Those without African language skills had to find other ways to signal that they belonged. Meanwhile, they also regularly made decisions about when and where to use Standard and a nonstandard variety of English spoken by some African Americans. For example, siblings David (age 16) and Ruth (age 13), both tall and athletic, are popular at school and church. They came to the US at ages 2 and 5 and are thoroughly Americanized in terms of accent and mannerisms. Although they do not speak an African language fluently, David always wears a necklace and bracelet from his homeland and occasionally a T-shirt that announces his foreign nationality, and Ruth thinks “the way we respect older people” is African. They are solidly middle-class with well-educated parents who expect them to become doctors or engineers, and they do well in school. Getting along with white people is also easy for them. “One of my white friends said her parents are racists, but they like me because I don’t really act black,” Ruth said. “I’m told that all the time too,” her brother interjected. They thought it was because they do not “talk black” – at least not in front of parents or authority figures.

However, in other contexts, they easily switch into a nonstandard variety of English spoken by some African-Americans. “That’s how I fit in with most people at school,” David said. Ruth added that she especially likes coming to youth group, because everyone who comes is in the same boat, which “just helps me switch back and forth,” she said.

Identity Confusion

Crossing ethnic and racial boundaries is possible and even enjoyable for those who like mixing with a broad range of friends, but it can also be confusing and even alienating when a person is made to feel like he or she does not fully belong in any social group. Rebecca, quoted at the beginning of the article, found herself in this situation. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) developed the concept of “social mirroring” to explain this problem. Our identities are significantly shaped by how others see us. Elsewhere I explore African immigrant parenting styles shape youth experiences in the diaspora (Habecker 2016). For those who shuttle back and forth between social groups, these messages can be contradictory, creating a great deal of confusion because their social mirrors keep changing. Research supporting the segmented assimilation concept has focused on how immigrant youth of African origins (‘black’) respond to social mirroring from mainstream society and their immigrant group (Waters 1999). What this analysis does not address is the social mirroring that African origins (‘black’) immigrant youth also experience among African American groups (both middle- and lower-class). This is an important issue that more recent studies of African immigrant youth have begun to address (Clark 2009; Awokoya 2012; Halter and Johnson 2014).

While some St. Augustine youth distanced themselves from African Americans as described above, several others did not. Take the example of Joyce (age 30) who grew up in another US state. She regularly moved between middle-class African Americans and her parents’ ethnic associations, but at times she felt ostracized by both groups. Her African American friends said she was too Afrocentric and did not like African Americans – ostensibly because she liked to eat at ethnic restaurants and preferred “exotic things.” By the same token, homeland friends sometimes called her a derogatory term they used to refer to African Americans, because she does not speak their homeland language. They would test the authenticity of her claim to their nationality by asking from what village and state her parents came. Even her own parents sometimes say she is too black and ask why she is behaving like an African American. Molinsky (2007) calls this problem “performance difficulty,” which refers to a situation where a person is unable to play a particular script convincingly, thus jeopardizing her claim to membership in a particular group, often resulting in embarrassment or feelings of unworthiness. Joyce said she is constantly reminded that she is between groups: “So I don’t like black people. I’m not black American. And I’m not [my nationality]. So what do you think I am?”

Like Joyce, most St. Augustine youth said that either currently or at some time in the past they were “confused,” had an “identity crisis,” or engaged in a “struggle” over their true identity and where they belonged. Finding acceptance among African Americans and their African immigrant community is only part of the full story, however. They all had white friends, too. Ben, who came to the US at age 9, speaks to his parents in their homeland languages and plays African drums at church every week. He is also on the football team at school, has a biracial girlfriend, and has five close friends who are racially mixed. When asked to what community he feels he belongs, he replied, “I don’t know what I am a part of, to be honest, ’cause I’m everywhere. I’m all over the place. I don’t know if there’s a specific community that I fit into, that I am a part of.” For Ben (now 19), moving back and forth between home and his American life is a real challenge. In his words: “It’s *hard*. It’s definitely hard, [...]. It’s like you’re living two different lives, ’cause at school you’re, like, living a whole different life, and at home you’re, like, living a whole different life.” With their social mirrors constantly changing, Ben and many others like him struggle to meet the many and varied expectations of who they are and how they should act.

The transnational lives of some African immigrant youth also contributed to a sense of identity confusion, especially when a person’s sense of self on one continent was challenged on another. One-third of the youth interviewed had visited their parents’ homeland at least once, and four visited regularly, making their lives significantly more transnational. For example, Mariam (mentioned earlier) visited relatives in Africa every other year while growing up in Fort Wayne, but she returned for an extended stay after high school. She remembered the cultural shock: “People say I don’t know my culture enough, that I’m not African enough, or that I need to stop speaking English and relearn my language.” She recalled that before she moved back to her parents’ homeland, she had thought of herself as African. However, now she said, “I hate it when people say, ‘You are an African.’ You can’t say that about me, especially if I have an American accent, and it’s so out there. It’s prominent. When I’m in [my homeland] people always ask, why do you sound like that? But when I’m here, I’m not that American, I guess.”

For some, one important way through this identity confusion was to claim a Christian identity that enabled them to occupy a more inclusive social category that trumped their complicated ethnic and racial identities. Rose (age 35) passionately explained that she views all her other identities as “a very distant second” to her Christian identity. John (age 24), who prefers to identify as a “hybrid,” also counts his Christian identity as important and more inclusive. He said, “[Christianity] gives you somewhat of a third identity that has no race. [...] It gives you some kind of identity that, that has no boundaries basically.” Meanwhile, Anne spent her high-school years attending St. Augustine with her family. However, she went through a time in college when, in her words, “I was trying to find myself” and “rebelled against everything I know.”

She stayed out late, drank, went to parties, stopped going to church, and “broke [her] African code” by moving in with her boyfriend. For Anne, her experiment in script-switching was a betrayal of her African and Christian heritage. However, she eventually renewed her Christian faith, radically reformed her behavior, and found her place to belong, not at St. Augustine, but within a more culturally and racially diverse church of other Christians.

The segmented assimilation concept fails to account for the important role religious identities can play in bringing together seemingly disparate social groups. To be sure, American churches can also be places of racial exclusion – as evidenced by the story one person shared of being obviously ignored at the information center in an all-white church. In addition, for teens growing up at St. Augustine, the practice of Christianity was part of their weekly routine via church and youth group attendance, but it was not a significant part of their self-identification. Nevertheless, several of the young adults at St. Augustine who had the opportunity to worship in American churches expressed a sense of belonging among other Christians that transcended ethnic, racial, and class boundaries. Meanwhile, the Sudanese youth at St. Augustine explained that many of their friends were other Muslims given that they all spoke Arabic. These youth easily moved back and forth between Muslim and Christian communities, depending on the context.

Creating New Hybrid Identities

The stories St. Augustine youth shared about themselves revealed that they had to constantly respond to how others viewed them, but they did not passively receive these messages. While social mirrors shaped how they viewed themselves, they were also active agents in a process of creating and defining themselves. St. Augustine young adults, especially, had much to say about how they weathered the identity struggles of their teen years and had grown to comfortably embrace their complex identities. In other words, age matters in the process of identity formation, as psychologist Erik Erikson’s (1959) seminal work demonstrates. While a few who came to the US as teens still strongly identified by nationality, most St. Augustine young adults embraced a hybrid identity and had found ways to navigate acceptance among many groups – including African Americans, other immigrants (both African and those from other continents as well), and whites. They also comfortably accepted multiple identities (e.g., national, pan-African, a person of African origins (‘black’), and African American) and typically did not insist on being one or the other, but many things at once. Three such young adults at St. Augustine illustrate well how African immigrant youth are finding their place both among African immigrants as well as native-born African Americans who are not necessarily marginalized, but rather minorities within the mainstream.

Steve, who came to the US at age 16, said his first friends in the US were mostly white teens or other African immigrants, and he had a “stereotypical view of African Americans, because I saw them as lazy.” However, after college, he got a city job working with all African Americans in a low-income neighborhood and developed close friendships there. Through that experience, he came to see himself as part of their community. “It’s not easy for me, especially now, to differentiate myself from the African American community,” he said. At the same time, his girlfriend is white, and he works in an all-white company now. And while he stopped going to St. Augustine for a while, he is back now – moving in and out of that community, and several others, on a weekly basis.

Rose, who arrived in a different US state at age 16, also spent most of her early years in the US with other immigrants. However, in graduate school she joined a church full of middle-class African American professionals where she made lasting relationships. She lamented that many African immigrants have a negative view of African Americans, and she wished they would learn more about African American history (as she did in college). She sees their history as a “significant survival story” that African immigrants also need to be proud of and grateful for, because if it were not for African Americans, she said, “I would not be able to come to America, sit in a bus with everybody else, go to school, and even have scholarships to do it. So I owe them.” Rose, now age 35, has no trouble identifying as “African American,” because “I have become an American citizen, so truly, truly I am African American. I have an African origin, and I am an American citizen.” She is also a member of St. Augustine and a middle-class professional, working easily among whites.

Joyce, discussed earlier, who grew up immersed both in African American and African immigrant communities, recently moved to Fort Wayne to take a job in a mostly white company. She did not go to church often growing up, but she and her husband (also of African descent) sought out St. Augustine, because they wanted to raise a family in a community of faith with a familiar African culture. Joyce feels that much of her African identity has been lost, so she is reconstructing it by doing things like joining St. Augustine, looking up homeland recipes online, and learning her husband’s homeland language. Reynolds (2012) documents a similar trend among Nigerian American students who prioritize learning Igbo in college as a means of connecting with family in Africa and facilitating potential transnational employment.

In these examples, young adults at St. Augustine had learned to navigate mainstream American culture successfully and expressed a great deal of respect for African American communities where they had been immersed and built close relationships. They also focused on cultural similarities between people from Africa and African Americans, making it possible for them to blur ethnic boundaries between the two groups and thus belong in both simultaneously. Strong family and fictive kinship bonds were the top of the list. Steve put it this way: “In church there are a lot of people I call aunts and uncles, and we’re not even related, so it’s just that bond of being – we’re Africans, so we all bond together. And that’s also in the black American community, which I absolutely love.”

Other similarities included a shared taste for spicy food, storytelling and music, a shared history, and a shared experience of race in America. Joyce believes that children of African immigrants are uniquely positioned to see these similarities: “When I am with my [homeland] friends, I feel like I am just like them. When I am with my black [African American] friends, I feel like I am just like them. So that answers the question to me that we’re the same.” These perspectives stand in stark contrast to those who could not name any similarities between the two groups beyond shared skin color. By embracing shared racial identification with African Americans and their own ethnic identities, those claiming new hybrid African American identities are engaged in reconciling work that brings together not just all the different pieces of their own identity puzzle, but potentially also disparate African origins (‘black’) communities (Awokoya 2012).

Conclusion

Once referred to as “invisible sojourners” (Arthur 2000), African immigrants and their US-born children are now receiving increased attention not only in immigration studies, but also from observers of black America. The political rise of Barack Obama, the son of a Kenyan father, has highlighted Black people in the US with recent African origins perhaps more than anything else. Eugene Robinson (2010) has emphasized the “disintegration” of African America, given increasingly deep class divides among native-born Black people and the growth of the “emergent” foreign-born African origins population. Meanwhile, historian Ira Berlin (2010) takes a longer, more integrated view, looking at this most recent “global passage” of foreign people of African heritage to the US as the latest wave in an ongoing story of cultural innovation in African American society.

This study reveals that African immigrant communities in small US cities play an important role in that ongoing story. The segmented assimilation concept suggests that ethnic communities are places that safeguard ethnic identities and protect immigrant youth against a rapid Americanization process. However, St. Augustine does not necessarily preserve ethnicity so much as provide a space for it to be celebrated and expressed as a significant part of a person’s evolving identity. The church reminds the youth of their African roots with its African songs, food, and fellowship. It provides them with role models to emulate, and a cultural heritage to proudly share with their American friends. It offers a haven of supportive friends who understand the African immigrant life in America and reminds them of a Christian identity that can transcend ethnic and racial boundaries. And just as African immigrant parents see the church as an important cultural context for raising Americanized children, it can serve a similar role when those Americanized children have children of their own and want them to grow up with exposure to an African community.

At the same time, the segmented assimilation model does well in capturing the divergent paths that the children of immigrants take. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the process of identity formation is rarely linear and often requires a great deal of trial and error. By reframing the assimilation process in terms of hybridity, it is possible to see how individuals move in and out of social groups, trying to forge new identities that bring two or more cultures together depending on context and life stage. Some are better equipped than others to successfully navigate the social boundaries between groups. For instance, hybrids that lack important socio-economic advantages are at risk of creating their own disenfranchised social groups that exhibit many of the same problems of lower-class American minorities. Meanwhile, others are well positioned to act as bridges and translators, constructively bringing together the different social groups to which they belong. Shared religious identities can also serve as a potential means for transcending social boundaries between people of diverse ethnic and racial groups who might otherwise not consider themselves part of the same social group. By looking closer at the experiences of America's newest African Americans, it is possible to see how new versions of Americans identities are constantly being created and to observe again how far the US has come in dismantling racism and how much further it needs to go.

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Notes

¹ Although the term "African American" is widely used, not all of the descendants accept it. Survey data shows that as many as 48.1% of the descendants preferred the label "black" versus "African American" (Siegelman et al. 2005).

² Of course, people from Africa and West Indians also have different histories that effect how they perceive ethnic and racial identities. However, these historical distinctions vary tremendously from country to country, making broad generalizations difficult to make.

³ Suarez-Orosco and Suzarez-Orosco (2001:9) warn that combining US- and foreign-born children in the same study presents "a major methodological flaw" because the experiences of new arrivals are "unique" and "must be analytically isolated from issues facing the subsequent US-born generations." This makes sense in the context of survey research. However, in an ethnographic study focused on one community, these groups are intertwined and often overlapping even within the same family, making any effort to disentangle them seem artificial and exclusionary.

⁴ In cooperation with the US Government, nine voluntary agencies, including Catholic Charities, place refugees in locations around the US deemed to have "available jobs, affordable housing, a receptive community, and specialized social services" (Wilson and Habecker 2008:434).

⁵ Forty-one percent of African people have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with only 28 percent of the total foreign-born (Gambino et al 2014).

⁶ Due to the high cost of maintaining their church building, St. Augustine sold it in 2015, and now they meet in a chapel owned by another Lutheran church in the northeast quadrant of Fort Wayne. Notably, a Burmese church community purchased the building from St. Augustine.