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## The Myth of Black Immigrant Privilege

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In June 2004, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story provocatively titled, “Top Colleges Take More Blacks, but Which Ones?”<sup>1</sup> The thesis of that story was that at East Coast Ivy League colleges in the United States, symbolized by Harvard, the majority of students of African descent who are admitted are disproportionately of African, Caribbean or to a lesser extent, mixed-race descent, that is, roughly two-thirds of the black student population. A siege mentality had taken hold among the native-born African-Americans, who had taken to calling themselves “the descendants” to distinguish themselves from the immigrants.

Top African-American scholars at Harvard such as Henry Louis Gates and Lani Guinier expressed concern that the original aim of affirmative action, to rectify the historical racist disenfranchisement of African-Americans, was being circumvented by this trend toward admitting black immigrants over native-born blacks.<sup>2</sup> According to one former SAT official, “these immigrants represent Horatio Alger, not *Brown v. Board of Education*,” in other words, black immigrants are more desirable to elite colleges because they confirm the truth of America’s favorite myth, that the society is a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps meritocracy, rather than its more ugly reality of institutionalized racism.

The Harvard debate is mirrored at other institutions, both elite and non-elite in the United States. In faculty and student forums, the discussions about the lack of black faculty and about exclusionary admissions policies often address the immigrant/native divide, either directly or indirectly. In one recent example, a former instructor of the Department of African-American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley wrote an essay for *The East Bay Express* in which he lambasted the university for what he claimed was its “reactionary strategy” of hiring Caribbean professors in African-American Studies in order to “keep African-Americans in line.” Other explanations as to why black immigrants have fared better than native-born blacks in the academy, both at the student and the faculty level, break down into the following categories:

Black immigrants are a “self-selecting group,” who come to the U.S. with higher levels of education and professional experience. If admissions policies were linked more firmly to economic disadvantage than to race as a criterion, the argument goes, then the numbers of native-born blacks in college would rise.

Black immigrants do not encounter the same levels of discrimination as native-born blacks, since they are not perceived to be part of the historic “quarrel” between blacks and whites in the U.S. Therefore, black immigrants, unlike other immigrants, actually benefit from their “otherness,” and their educational and professional success is contingent upon their NOT becoming Americanized.<sup>3</sup>

Coming from majority-black societies, black immigrants are more confident and less psychologically handicapped by the stigma of race. Additionally, they have a supposedly superior cultural ethos that validates hard work and education, as opposed to that of native-born blacks in the U.S.

White administrators and faculty are more comfortable with black immigrants, who are seen as more amenable to institutional interests. This preference is marked by a desire to appoint faculty who work on “diaspora” issues, a code word for a black immigrant candidate. This claim appears to be linked to the statistical fact, pointed out by several sociologists, that white employers prefer to hire any immigrant, black or non-black, over an African-American.

As a black faculty member of Caribbean descent at Rutgers University—Newark, which is reported to be the nation’s most ethnically diverse campus, I would like to apply a corrective lens to the “problem” of black immigrant privilege. Rutgers-Newark is a state institution, in which the majority of students are of first or second-generation immigrant heritage, and who are, for the most part, solidly working or lower-middle class. Rutgers-Newark is an important test case because I think it is important to look at a wider lens than elite universities such as Harvard when discussing the supposed advantages of black immigrants in the admissions and faculty hiring process. The vast majority of black students, whether native-born or immigrant, do not go to the Ivy Leagues. They go to state institutions like Rutgers-Newark to gain their foothold to the American Dream, and I think these kinds of institutions are a better place to situate any discussion of black immigrant privilege.

Newark is a primarily African-American city, infamous for its race riots in the late 1960s from which it is still recovering, economically. The city has been revitalized in large part by the huge influx of immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa, who have opened up shops, started businesses, and helped to drive up property values. African-Americans control its political structure. When I first started teaching at Rutgers in the early 1990s, the majority of the students in my courses in the African-American & African Studies Department were native-born African-Americans, with a significant minority of foreign-born blacks. In my “African-American Literature” course, which could reliably be predicted to draw an African-American student base, the same held true. My African-American students would ask me questions such as, “Why do Africans and Caribbeans see themselves as not black?”, a which word, to them, was synonymous with African-American.

Over the years, I was asked that less and less, and now not at all. The demographics have changed dramatically; while I have no firm numbers—Rutgers doesn’t carry any statistics beyond that for black students admitted—I can safely say that the last time I taught African-American Literature a few years back, the once-packed course was no longer full to capacity, and the decisive majority of students in the class were Caribbean or of Caribbean descent. Unlike my old African-American students, they did not feel that the course was about “their” heritage, and many of them were unfamiliar with the basic historical facts and cultural rituals of African-Americans in the United States.

What does this all mean? It certainly means that there are more foreign-born blacks being admitted to Rutgers, obviously. But the crucial question becomes, does this mean that foreign-

born black students are being accepted *at the expense of native-born blacks*? I would argue no. Northern New Jersey is a heavily immigrant area, as is the entire east coast of the United States to a greater or lesser extent. Although the concern at Harvard is that black immigrants have disproportionate access to influence and power at the highest levels of American society by their entrance into the Ivy Leagues, one might make the same argument for the working class, first-generation students entering the state institutions like Rutgers hoping to enter into the ranks of the middle class. Immigrants, both black and non-black are continuously reshaping the American landscape. The large black immigrant populations of New York City, Newark and Jersey City supply correspondingly large numbers of black students to not just City University of New York or Rutgers, but also to Harvard and University of Pennsylvania and the like. Black immigrants now make up one-half of the black population of New York city; since students tend to go to school not too far from home, whether in highly selective private or less selective state schools, it cannot be surprising, or reflective of some innate superiority or white bias, that those students admitted to Harvard, CUNY or Rutgers reflect the changing face of black America.

The argument that black immigrants are more highly educated also distorts the reality by conflating black immigrants together. African immigrants are, on average, far more highly educated than Caribbean immigrants, or even white Americans, having the highest portion of advanced degrees among any ethnic group besides Indians. By contrast, Caribbean immigrants have roughly the same levels of “low” educational attainment as African-Americans,<sup>4</sup> and are more likely to come from poverty than are African-Americans. According to one recent study, 22 % of African-Americans had incomes below the poverty level, compared to 34 % for Haitians,<sup>5</sup> for example, despite the fact that Haitians have significantly less “low” education than do other African-Americans or Caribbean immigrants. Language poses a significant barrier to Caribbean immigrants from French and Spanish-speaking societies, and they are as a result less likely to do well on standardized testing or to get jobs with employers who favor English-speaking employees. In this respect, the English-speaking Caribbean groups have an advantage over other Caribbean immigrants, although their socio-economic status still falls below U.S. norms, and most Anglophone Caribbean immigrants tend to live in the same impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, as do African-Americans, with the same limited access to good schools and educational services.<sup>6</sup>

I have found that my Caribbean-born students have extremely divided educational experiences; while some come to the U.S. very well prepared, many others struggle with writing basic grammar because of the weak educational institutions for non-elite students in countries like Jamaica or Haiti. Nevertheless, these students generally do well across socio-economic lines; and indeed a recent study also concludes that black immigrant students at CUNY perform very well compared to native-born blacks or to Puerto Ricans.<sup>7</sup> Therefore the argument that admissions policies need to favor the economically disadvantaged will not necessarily change the cultural balance at the larger institutional level.

Lest we succumb to the idea that black Caribbean success at the college level reaffirms these beliefs in a superior Caribbean cultural ethos, or the need for black Caribbeans to resist “African-Americanization,” it should be noted that sociologists disagree about the results of African-Americanization. While some suggest that 2nd generation Caribbean youth, who identify with African-Americans and who acquire African-American cultural practices, face downward mobility and less educational success, others conclude that those in the 2nd generation who identify more strongly with African-Americans tend to attain *higher* levels of socioeconomic status than their parents.<sup>8</sup>

The argument that anti-assimilation on the one hand, and Caribbean cultural retention on the other, is responsible for Caribbean success, is also countered by the current agonizing over the dismal performance of Caribbean immigrant youth in England and Canada. In those countries, the sub-par performance of black Caribbean youth, particularly young men, is ascribed to the *inability* to assimilate to the cultural ethos of Canada or Britain.<sup>9</sup> Further, there is a similar striking disparity between rates of education and employment for Caribbean men and women immigrants in the U.S. as well, suggesting that factors other than culture may be at play here.

Finally, a comment on the perception that Black Studies Departments are being hijacked by Caribbean immigrants. Black Studies Departments were created by African-Americans in the 1960s to protest the lack of study of African diaspora peoples or histories, and it is because of them that all of the other departments in the U.S. academy are now eager to hire faculty in African history, Caribbean politics or Afro-Brazilian culture. Black Studies was always a home for Caribbean and African Studies, precisely because African-Americans recognized their value and pursued their inclusion. Now that there are more black immigrants in the U.S. and the academy has finally recognized the need for the study of black immigrants and their home countries, it makes sense that there are more black immigrant faculty in the academy who specialize in the Black Diaspora, just as it tends to be African-American scholars who are hired to teach African-American history, politics and so forth.

This is not to say we must lose sight of the centrality of the African-American experience to black people of all ethnicities in the United States, or that we must think that merely being black is a substitute for having a specifically African-American presence, both among faculty and students, in the academy. If on the one hand we immigrants are not particularly privileged by the academy as some argue, it is also true that we can no longer maintain that we are trying to push our way in. We *are* in. And now that we are, one of the benefits of the black immigrant presence is that we black scholars, whether native-born or not, need not teach what I call “the black hole”—that is, everything pertaining to black people in the curriculum, regardless of our expertise or training, simply because we are black—because the academy has finally recognized the varieties of culture and politics that are the African Diaspora, and that is a good thing for all of us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Sara Rimer and Karen W. Arenson, *New York Times* (June 24, 2004), p. 1

<sup>2</sup>A “native born” African-American is defined as someone all four of whose grandparents were born in the U.S.

<sup>3</sup>This argument was put forth by sociologist Mary C. Waters in her book, *Black Identities: West Indian Dreams and American Realities* (Harvard UP 1999).

<sup>4</sup>According to the Mumford Report ([mumford1.dyndns.org/cen2000/blackwhite/blackdiversityreport](http://mumford1.dyndns.org/cen2000/blackwhite/blackdiversityreport)), 50% of Caribbean immigrants have a high school degree or less; as of 2000, 16.3% of African-Americans in NYC were college-educated, compared to 18.2% for Caribbean immigrants, and 20% for African immigrants. Afro-Caribbeans stay in school for an average of 12.8 years, compared to 12.5% for African-Americans, and 14.5% for African immigrants. John R. Lan and Glenn Deane, University of Albany, August 15, 2003, “Black Diversity in Metropolitan America”, Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research.

<sup>5</sup>Surgeon General’s Report, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1999, posted on [mentalhealth.org](http://mentalhealth.org).

<sup>6</sup>Ruben G. Rumbaut, “Immigrants from Latin America & the Caribbean”, Julian Samora Research Institute, 1995.

<sup>7</sup>Report by CUNY sociologists Philip Kasinitz, Mary C. Waters, and Mollenkopfin, posted on [www.newschool.edu/icmec](http://www.newschool.edu/icmec).

<sup>8</sup>Kasinitz, Waters, and Mollenkopf arguing the former, Matthijs Kalmijn (1996) the latter.

<sup>9</sup>See Anjool Malde, “‘Is It Cos I is Black, Sir?’ Discovering the Problem of Black Underachievement”, (<http://www.anjool.co.uk/dissertation.htm>). Author also notes high levels of African immigrant educational attainment coming into the United Kingdom, where African youth are doing relatively badly in spite of this advantage.

Works Cited

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