

Becoming Black
Understanding immigrant resistance to assimilation in the U.S.

Claire L. Adida*

Amanda L. Robinson†

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*UCSD
†OSU

1 Introduction

Africans comprise the fastest-growing group of immigrants to the United States today. Their numbers have doubled since 1970, reaching 1.8 million in 2013. Four decades ago, African immigrants accounted for a mere 0.8% of the total immigrant population in the US; today, this proportion has quintupled to 4.4% [1]. Yet little is known about the integration experiences of these African immigrants relative to those of immigrants from other parts of the world. Studies of assimilation among immigrants from Latin America, as well as historical waves of immigration from Europe, tend to find that assimilation into American society increases with time and results in improved economic outcomes, as these populations tend to be absorbed within mainstream, White American society [2].

In contrast, the surge in African immigration to the US offers an opportunity to study the process of integration when the segment of the host population into which the immigrants would most likely assimilate – African Americans in the case of African immigrants – is itself a marginalized minority experiencing worse economic and health outcomes than the average American. African immigrants, regardless of their own sense of racial identity, are confronted upon arrival to the US with an extreme form of hypodescent that characterizes them as “Black” [3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. As a result of the social stratification by race in the US, previous research on Black immigrants, largely Caribbean, suggests that, in contrast to many other immigrant groups, *resistance* to assimilation among Black immigrants yields better economic [8, 5] and health outcomes [9, 10]. Thus, Black immigrants often resist identifying as African Americans because of anticipated prejudice from White Americans, because of their own prejudices against the African American population, or because they fear losing connections to their cultural heritage [11, 3, 4, 12, 13]. Such resistance is characterized by strategies to “mark” oneself as belonging to a particular ethnic or national group, distinct from American Blacks and outside the white-black racial dichotomy, through the use of “foreign” names, the creation of exclusive social networks, the choice over residential location, and the prioritization of an identity defined by nationality of origin [5, 14]. On the other side of the immigrant-host interaction, African immigrants may be rejected as African American by native-born Black Americans, in an effort to limit immigrants’ access to goods and benefits secured by African Americans through past political struggles (e.g., affirmative action policies) [7].

This project, in collaboration with Amanda Robinson (Ohio State University), offers a systematic study of African immigrant integration into American society, with a focus on how racial and religious discrimination in the United States today shapes the incentives that racial and religious immigrant minorities have to integrate. For example, for Black immigrants with cultural and phenotypic overlap, for whom assimilation should be easiest, assimilation might threaten their ability to credibly claim an alternative, immigrant identity in contexts where such an identity would be beneficial. Similarly, Muslim immigrants facing anti-Muslim host societies may face an incentive to highlight alternative identities that may or may not facilitate their integration as immigrants.

This project builds on Mary Waters’ initial insights that immigrants may face disincentives to integrate [5].¹ It offers a framework through which to systematically investigate the insight: under what conditions does immigrant visibility increase assimilation, and under what conditions does it hinder assimilation? It also develops a framework for understanding the conditions under which an immigrant group’s proximal host might facilitate or hinder immigrant assimilation. By doing so,

¹For a broader theoretical explanation of enduring marginality, see [15].

it considers the wider implications of these results for the integration of new waves of immigrants into the U.S. and Europe in a time of rising populist politics. Indeed, if populism is a rejection of pluralism [16] and liberalism [17], then it thrives on exclusion. This is certain to shape the incentives of already-marginalized host communities as much as those of new migrant groups themselves.

2 Theoretical framework

Immigrants vary in the degree of perceptible overlap they share with their host communities. Prior research tends to assume that greater cultural overlap facilitates immigrant integration. But more recently, social scientists have found that cultural overlap may shape immigrant incentives to assimilate in surprising ways. Indeed, when the immigrant network controls access to certain benefits, and the proximal host [18] is either unreceptive or marginalized, preserving an immigrant identity may be beneficial. Caribbean immigrants in New York, for example, resisted assimilation as Black Americans precisely because this would entail assimilation into a marginalized and vulnerable minority [5]. The same outcome results in West Africa, though for different reasons. Nigerian immigrants in Accra, Cotonou, and Niamey resist assimilation in order to maintain access to immigrant group benefits such as economic and security assistance [19]. We rely on these insights to build a theory connecting immigrant visibility and immigrant assimilation. We then test it systematically in the context of African immigrant integration in the United States.

We argue that immigrants face incentives to resist assimilation when they are likely to assimilate into a marginalized or unreceptive community. Borrowing the words of Mittelberg and Waters, when the proximal hosts face discrimination, immigrants may be better off resisting assimilation [18]. Several mechanisms may drive these disincentives to assimilate:

- Immigrant networks offer key benefits
- Proximal hosts face discrimination
- Proximal hosts raise barriers to entry to limit competition for resources

There are a number of ways in which immigrants may share traits with their host communities. We focus on two such sources of variation in overlap with hosts, the first more exogenous than the second: phenotypic traits and cultural attributes.

First, African immigrants vary in their phenotypic overlap with proximate hosts in the United States. Specifically, countries in the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somali) are comprised primarily of Afroasiatic (Cushitic or Semitic) peoples, who are, on average, phenotypically distinct from the Bantu and Nilotic groups that comprise the majority of the rest of the continent and from which most African Americans descend [20]. Existing evidence suggests that many Afroasiatic peoples do not consider themselves Black or African, even within the context of Africa [14], and both Black and White Americans may perceive immigrants of Afroasiatic descent as “Black” but distinct from Black Americans. While we focus on Afroasiatic vs. Bantu-Nilotic ethnic groups as a major source of variation in phenotypic overlap with the Black American population, we recognize (and seek to incorporate empirically) the fact that there is also significant variation across individuals from the same country in terms of how much they are physically “marked” as immigrants. Second, cultural attributes such as names, accents, or religious belonging, may also produce variation in how much a particular African immigrant is perceived to be distinct from African Americans [5], though we recognize that these are relatively less sticky, and therefore likely more endogenous, indicators of immigrant visibility.

Counterintuitively, because they face less risk of being lumped in with African Americans and thus have a greater ability to maintain a viable alternative to an African American identity when desired, Black immigrants with less phenotypic and cultural overlap may actually be *less* resistant to identifying as Black or African American. They may also be seen as less threatening to African Americans, who would maintain the ability to exclude immigrants from some benefits of African American identity. This is the very pattern documented in previous research among Nigerian immigrants in three West African cities – Accra, Ghana; Cotonou, Benin; and Niamey, Niger. In particular, the more ethnic and cultural overlap the Nigerian immigrants shared with their host population, the *less* they integrated [19]. This lack of integration among more similar immigrants is due to their greater ability to “pass” as native, resulting in (1) more in-group solidarity and commitment to maintaining distinctiveness, and (2) more host rejection of and hostility towards immigrants in order to limit their access to native benefits. If similar dynamics hold for African immigrants to the US, we expect that immigrants with greater phenotypic and cultural overlap with African Americans will be less likely to identify as African American, and less likely to assimilate into American society.

3 Empirical strategy

We seek to collect original, systematic data on the integration experiences of African immigrants into the highly racialized American context. To do so, we focus on Somali immigrants in Columbus, Ohio. The focus on Somali immigrants is ideal for three reasons:

- Somali immigrants represent one of the fastest growing immigrant population in the U.S. in the past decade: they represented 4% of the foreign-born population from Africa in the US, compared to only 1% in 1970 (2008-2012 ACS). In absolute numbers, the population grew from 36,000 in 2000 (Census) to approximately 120,000 in 2010 (ACS).
- Somali immigrants are both Black and Muslim.
- Somali immigrants are either ethnically Bantu or ethnically Somali, an ethnic distinction that maps onto a difference in immigrant visibility, offering us an opportunity to explore the implications of varying visibility for assimilation, holding constant national origin and religious identity.

Columbus, Ohio is an ideal location site for the following three reasons:

- After Minneapolis, it houses the second-largest community of Somali immigrants in the US.
- Unlike Minneapolis, it houses a large proportion of *both* ethnic Bantu *and* ethnic Somali immigrants. By contrast, the Somali population in Minneapolis is overwhelmingly ethnic Somali.
- It also is home to a significant African American population (14.2%).

Our strategy is a multi-method approach to understanding African immigrant integration in the U.S.:

1. Interviews with African immigrant and Black American students at the Ohio State University ($N = 53$)
2. Focus groups with members of the Somali immigrant community in Columbus ($N = 8 * 10$)
3. A lab experiment gauging the identifiability of African immigrants, in which we incentivized a sample of OSU students ($N = 170$) to guess the background (immigrant or not) of our African student subjects (limited only to those who consented to this experiment). Some of these OSU students were asked to guess based only on the subject’s name; some, based only on the subject’s photo; and some, based on a short video of the subject introducing

him/herself. For purposes of measuring immigrant visibility in the most exogenous manner, we rely primarily on the photo-based measure of identifiability (we assume that names and accents are more easily fungible than phenotype).

4. A survey of Somali immigrants in Columbus ($N = 600$)

4 Preliminary findings

Our findings reveal the following patterns.

- The African immigrants we interviewed were remarkably on-the-mark about how identifiable they are as immigrants. Indeed, whether we measure visibility as being from the Horn of Africa (v. not), as being Muslim (v. not), or as scoring above the sample average for identifiability based only on a photo (v. below average), we find that more visible migrants are aware that they are more visible. In our student interviews, respondents with heritage from outside the Horn (those less visible as immigrants) repeatedly mentioned that others perceived them to be Black Americans. Ross, who immigrated from Benin as a child, said “You are black. There are not going to know, oh you are African, or whatever the case is” and Joyce, an Ivorian American, said “when you first see me you see black. You don’t see that I’m African or whatever. It doesn’t really matter I’m still black.” Jackie, a second generation Nigerian American, similarly said “people looking at me on the outside without looking at my name...they are going to be like “oh she’s Black-American.” Another second generation Nigerian American, Paul also felt that most Americans assume he’s Black American: “People from other races when they look at me, they don’t really see different parts of Africa, they see Black American.” And Sarah, a recent immigrant from Ghana, recalled, “my roommate, she didn’t recognize me as African before I told her ‘I’m African, I came from Ghana.’ I think they can’t really tell until you say it, or start speaking.”

In contrast, interview subjects from the Horn recognized that Americans distinguish them from Black Americans. One respondent of Ethiopian heritage, Rachel, remarked that people say she is “‘black’ but not Black.” Cara, a first generation Somali immigrant, said that “almost always they know I’m East African” and Mary, a recent immigrant from Ethiopia, said “they know that I’m not [Black American], either I’m mixed or Somali or East African.” Similarly, Nancy, an Ethiopian immigrant who came to the U.S. as a child, said “I was always mistaken as native American or Latina, or something, they always said I looked exotic.” Marlum, an American whose parents are Somali, remarked that other people often say to her “you look foreign.”

Most of these respondents focused on their physical appearance as “marking” them as distinct from Black American. Thomas, a recent immigrant from Eritrea, remarked that Americans know he and other Eritreans are not Black Americans “by our looks” and Rachel, a second generation Ethiopian American said “I’m not sure what they mistake me as, especially since I’m a lighter complexion. I’ve gotten different, you know, non-Black... they think I’m not Black or not African.” Ariel, a second generation Ethiopian American, recounted, “From what I’ve experienced, people don’t assume I’m African. Even when I tell them, they go, ‘Oh, you’re light,’ or some other stupid comment.” In general, respondents with heritage from the Horn region regularly noted their distinct physical appearance. Cara, originally from Somalia, noted that “we have different hair” and Thomas, originally from Eritrea, said “most of the Eastern Africans look alike, with a light skin color and a different look than most African nations.” Halima, a 1.5 generation Somali immigrant, noted that “people say that our features are kind of different as East Africans compared to African Americans.”

	African immigrants ($N = 35$)		
	Horn ($N = 11$)	Not Horn ($N = 23$)	Difference ($ H - NH $)
Believe whites misID them as Black American	0.30	0.77	0.47***
Believe blacks misID them as Black American	0.33	0.57	0.24
Correctly ID'ed as African immigrant (photo)	0.75	0.51	0.24**
Correctly ID'ed as African immigrant (name)	0.79	0.80	0.01
Correctly ID'ed as African immigrant (video)	0.74	0.76	0.02
	African immigrants ($N = 35$)		
	Muslim ($N = 10$)	Not Muslim ($N = 25$)	Difference ($ M - NM $)
Believe whites misID them as Black American	0.22	0.78	0.56***
Believe blacks misID them as Black American	0.25	0.58	0.33
Correctly ID'ed as African immigrant (photo)	0.68	0.54	0.14
Correctly ID'ed as African immigrant (name)	0.84	0.77	0.07
Correctly ID'ed as African immigrant (video)	0.76	0.72	0.04
	African immigrants ($N = 35$)		
	Identifiable (Photo) ($N = 16$)	Not Identifiable (Photo) ($N = 12$)	Diff. ($ I - NI $)
Believe whites misID them as Black American	0.53	0.90	0.37*
Believe blacks misID them as Black American	0.43	0.73	0.30
Correctly ID'ed as African immigrant (photo)	0.75	0.34	0.41***
Correctly ID'ed as African immigrant (name)	0.77	0.81	0.04
Correctly ID'ed as African immigrant (video)	0.78	0.66	0.12

- The implication of this for many of our respondents, we argue, is that these African immigrants – especially those not from the Horn – are likely to be exposed to the same types of discrimination faced by Black Americans. For example, Noble, a first generation Ghanaian immigrant shared the following story: “I was working as a graduate student and then one time I had a question that I wanted to discuss with the professor...When I knocked at the door and when the professor saw me, he just lifted his trash bin and gave it to me. When I said ‘What do I do with it?’ he said ‘ohhhh, sorry, sorry, I thought you were the cleaner.’” And I think it’s because I am Black.” Another respondent, Caleb, a Nigerian who immigrated to the U.S. as a child, echoed similar experiences, saying “When they say that African American or Black Americans tend to be violent, I am part of it. I cannot disassociate myself, everybody who sees me groups me [with Black Americans] until the person gets to know me. If they said African Americans don’t like education until you know me and see me, the first thing you see me by is my color, think African American, so you classify me into that group. If they say people like do drugs, I would be classified the same.”

When we test the implication of this hypothesis in a more systematic manner, we find some corroborating evidence among our student interview data, though admittedly this seems to vary based on which indicator of visibility we use. For example, if we measure visibility as Muslim vs. non-Muslim, our data are consistent with our expectations: Muslims identify as Black more than do non-Muslims. But if we rely instead on our objective indicator of visibility, the data are more difficult to interpret. The table below illustrates this ambiguity. For ease of interpretation, we classify the more visible (as immigrant) group in the first column, and the less visible group in the second column. Each indicator is coded such that a higher number indicates greater affinity with Black Americans (measured as self-identification, linked fate, and policy preferences). Our argument implies a higher number in the first column than in the second column, meaning more affinity with Black Americans for those who are more visible as immigrants.

	African immigrants (<i>N</i> = 35)		
	Horn (<i>N</i> = 11)	Not Horn (<i>N</i> = 23)	Difference (<i> H</i> - <i>NH</i>)
Identify as Black (0-1)	0.09	0.14	0.05
Close to Blacks (0-3)	1.80	1.83	0.03
Linked fate with Blacks (0-3)	2.80	2.43	0.37
Don't believe Black resp. for income gap (0-1)	0.82	0.53	0.30
Don't believe Black resp. for incarceration (0-1)	1.00	0.61	0.39**
Support BLM (1-3)	2.43	2.20	0.23
Support affirmative action (0-1)	0.60	0.30	0.30
Politically active (1-3)	1.70	1.61	0.09
	African immigrants (<i>N</i> = 35)		
	Muslim (<i>N</i> = 10)	Not Muslim (<i>N</i> = 25)	Difference (<i> M</i> - <i>NM</i>)
Identify as Black (0-1)	0.20	0.13	0.07
Close to Blacks (0-3)	1.90	1.83	0.07
Linked fate with Blacks (0-3)	2.67	2.52	0.14
Don't believe Black resp. for income gap (0-1)	0.80	0.56	0.24
Don't believe Black resp. for incarceration (0-1)	0.90	0.68	0.22
Support BLM (1-3)	2.57	2.19	0.38
Support affirmative action (0-1)	0.50	0.39	0.11
Politically active (1-3)	1.78	1.60	0.18
	African immigrants (<i>N</i> = 35)		
	Identifiable (Photo) (<i>N</i> = 16)	Not Identifiable (Photo) (<i>N</i> = 12)	Diff. (<i> I</i> - <i>NI</i>)
Identify as Black (0-1)	0.06	0.25	0.19
Close to Blacks (0-3)	1.67	2	0.33
Linked fate with Blacks (0-3)	2.6	2.75	0.15
Don't believe Black resp. for income gap (0-1)	0.56	0.66	0.10
Don't believe Black resp. for incarceration (0-1)	0.75	0.75	0.00
Support BLM (1-3)	2.21	2.27	0.06
Support affirmative action (0-1)	0.64	0.20	0.44**
Politically active (1-3)	1.69	1.58	0.10

- Our focus groups provide qualitative information that corroborates our hypothesis. The focus groups were conducted separately by age (under 36, over 36), gender (male/female), and ethnicity (Bantu/Somali). These were structured conversations covering topics such as racial identification, political affiliation, closeness to Black Americans, etc... Of the eight focus groups, only Somali (more visible as immigrants) focus groups confirmed that they identify as Black; all Bantu focus groups agreed that they did not. Additionally, Somalis were the only ones to provide a more nuanced view of their relations with Black Americans: all Bantus agreed that they did not have good relations with Black Americans. Similarly, the Bantu focus groups either claimed that they had never heard of the Black Lives Matter movement, or that they had no affinity to it; Somalis, on the other hand, expressed affinity toward the BLM movement. In sum, in the context of focus groups, Somalis – those more visible as immigrants – express greater closeness to Black Americans. This pattern is again consistent with our argument that immigrant visibility may decrease assimilation into a racial minority.
- Our community survey of ethnic Bantus and Somalis in Columbus, Ohio, is ongoing. This dataset will allow us to test our preliminary findings on a larger sample and more systematically.

5 Implications

We argue that immigrants may resist assimilation when this would mean assimilating into a marginalized community. Two mechanisms could be driving this result, and they are not mutually exclusive. On the immigrant side, immigrants may refuse to assimilate into a community that is already struggling and marginalized. On the host side, proximate hosts may feel threatened by new arrivals who may compete with them over scarce resources, such as jobs, housing, or even acceptance from hosts with no immigrant background.

This raises important implications for new immigrant waves to Europe and the United States today, whose proximate hosts are – increasingly – older immigrant waves that have experienced discrimination and marginalization themselves. What role might these hosts play for new migrant integration. We can imagine, for example, that Syrian refugees in Germany might encounter resistance from ethnic Turks who are German but who experience discrimination and lower SES opportunities. The same could be true for Syrian refugees in France facing resistance from Maghrebis and children of Maghrebi immigrants; or for Syrian refugees in the UK facing resistance from South Asians and children of South Asian immigrants.

There is anecdotal evidence that this is already happening. In Germany, more established immigrant communities are not whole-heartedly embracing the arrival of Syrian refugees. In 2015, a YouGov survey found that 40% of Germans with an immigrant background wanted Germany to accept fewer refugees; this is very close to the 45% of Germans without such immigrant background expressing the same preference. Furthermore, 24% of Germans with immigrant background prefer that Germany accept *no more* refugees, a proportion indistinguishable from the 25% of Germans without immigrant background expressing that same preference [21]. Anecdotal evidence confirms that this surprising pattern might be driven by two distinct mechanisms: established migrants seek to avoid becoming targets of new waves of xenophobia that tend to accompany the arrival of new migrants; and new migrants tend to settle in urban centers where established migrants live, and where housing and jobs are scarce [22].

This certainly wouldn't be the first time scholars document animosity between two marginalized groups. A rich literature in American politics has already shown that racial minorities may not

always bond over their marginal status or common experience with discrimination, especially when they compete over finite resources (e.g., [23]). When we apply these insights to the current political context, we question whether proximate hosts are more likely to help or hurt new immigrant integration. Indeed, in a political landscape favorable to populist politics and rhetoric, are older generations of immigrants facing increasing incentives to exclude new arrivals? Our research and preliminary findings raise a call for new research on the role proximate hosts play in the integration of new immigrants, and the strategies these migrant communities devise to navigate hostile socio-political environments.

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