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ARTICLE

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Making moral migrants? Exploring the educational aspirations of Black African and Caribbean boys in a New York City public school

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on 48 in-depth interviews with Black immigrant and second-generation boys at Bridgewood secondary school in New York City, this article points out how the high educational aspirations expressed by Black African and Caribbean boys are strategically deployed as features of an ethnic project to counter anti-immigrant sentiments and anti-Black racism in US society. The findings indicate that in a context of rising xenophobia along with the historical and continual stereotypes of Black people in the US, participants' aspirations for elite higher education function as strategies to enhance their individual and ethnic reputations. High educational aspirations were also used to justify emigration to and worth within the US. At its core, this article illustrates how participants mobilized aspirations to represent themselves as moral migrants and 'worthy' ethnic minorities. Moral claims and ethnicity-based campaigns associated with aspirations are problematized because they reinforce the hierarchical racial order that informs US society.

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Introduction

On 11 January 2018, US president Donald Trump sparked international controversy due to comments he made during a discussion with lawmakers about immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa and Haiti (Griffiths & Smith-Spark, 2018; Watkins & Phillip, 2018). In a meeting at The White House with senators seeking a bipartisan agreement on a range of US immigration issues, Trump allegedly asked 'Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?' (Gambino, 2018, p. 7). Trump quickly suggested increased immigration from 'countries such as Norway' as a more effective strategy (Reuters, 2018, p. 1). White House officials did not refute reports of these remarks, but instead maintained that the president '…is fighting for permanent solutions that make our country

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stronger by welcoming those who can contribute to our society, grow our economy and assimilate into our great nation' (Davis, Stolberg, & Kaplan, 2018, p. A1). In response to Trump's disparaging remarks about African and Haitian immigrants, social activists, political commentators and immigration experts highlighted evidence of Black immigrants' social contributions, career accomplishments and educational achievements all in an attempt to roundly denounce (re)emerging anti-Black and anti-immigrant sentiments in US society (Kivland, 2018; Lipman, 2019; Moore & Porter, 2018; Romero, 2018). This article adds to – and where possible, complicates – such efforts by highlighting the use of educational aspirations for higher education as part of ongoing moral campaigns and ethnic projects among Black immigrant and second-generation boys in one of New York City's largest secondary schools.[1]

Before exploring these and related claims in greater detail, I first examine trends in sociological research on aspirations, noting the marked absence of scholarship on the aspirations of Black immigrants in US schools and the implications of such aspirations for their higher education trajectories. Next, I present Treitler's (2013) conceptualization of ethnic projects as a set of cultural strategies and ideological schemes some Black immigrants use to negotiate America's racial hierarchy. Ethnic projects are fueled by a belief that ethnic distinctions can diminish anti-Black racism. However, Treitler (2013) argues that in practice, ethnic projects reinforce the existing racial order in the United States. After outlining the dynamics of ethnic projects, I highlight the research design, as informed by gaps in the literature, along with the data analysis procedures from which the findings emerge. I then outline the findings from the empirical study, pointing out that in a context of rising xenophobia and ongoing stereotypes of Black immigrants in the US, participants' aspirations for elite higher education function as key strategies to increase their social status, enhance their ethnic reputations, justify emigration to and worth in the US, and thus construct themselves as moral migrants. The discussion that follows the empirical findings problematizes such ethnic projects in higher education, noting the ways in which they reinforce the hierarchical racial order that informs US society.

Critical attention to the study of Black immigrants in the US is of considerable political import for at least three distinct reasons. First, research on the civic, educational and cultural contributions of Black immigrants and their children can in some respects challenge dominant anti-Black and xenophobic pronouncements in the US political arena, especially given the current zeitgeist (Imoagene, 2017; Model, 2008b). Second, the study of Black Africans and Black Caribbeans in the US calls attention to the heterogeneity among Black Americans, particularly in a context where Black and African American are often used interchangeably as synonymous descriptors (Imoagene, 2017;

Waters, 1999). Third, ongoing migrant flows from sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean have changed the demography of the US, particularly in gateway cities such as New York City, Boston, Fort Lauderdale, among others. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that there are approximately 3.6 million Black immigrants currently residing in the United States (Mwangi & Fries-Britt, 2015). Furthermore, Black immigrants and their children account for nearly 20% of Blacks in the United States (Greer, 2013; Mwangi & Fries-Britt, 2015). Based on analyses of US census data, the Pew Research Center estimates that there has been a fivefold increase in the foreign-born Black population in the US since 1980, with a significant share of these Black immigrants hailing from Jamaica, Haiti and Nigeria (Foner, 2018). In regions like New York City, Black immigrants and their children constitute over 65% of the Black population in the city (Foner, 2001, 2018). Such demographic shifts have implications for political life (Greer, 2013), neighborhood formations (Vickerman, 1999), and as this article will show, for educational aspirations in New York City public schools.[2]

Analyzing aspirations: key trends & takeaways

The impact of aspirations on the educational outcomes of young people is widely documented in sociological and educational research (Baker, 2017; Hart, 2016; Lee & Zhou, 2015; Louie, 2001; Neilson, 2015; Strand, 2014; Strand & James, 2008). Key trends in the international literature on aspirations suggest that educational aspirations are dynamic, future-oriented, multidimensional formulations that vary across time (historical and contemporary periods), terms (short, medium and long), type (latent, actual, revealed, etc.) and life course (childhood, adolescence and adulthood) (Hart, 2012; Kao & Tienda, 1998). International research on aspirations also suggest that educational aspirations are critical mechanisms in the processes of social mobility, status attainment and related dimensions of social reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; McLeod, 1995; Nitardy, Duke, Pettingell, & Borowsky, 2014). Over the past two decades, sociological scholarship in the US, UK and around the world has not only analyzed the formation, function and development of educational aspirations particularly among young people, but has also roundly critiqued the use of aspirations in public discourse as an 'ideological whip' (Reay & Lucey, 2010), as a prime motivation for productive citizenship (Kennelly & Dillabough, 2008; Neilson, 2015), as an antidote to social disadvantage (Appadurai, 2004), and as a diversion from increasing structural inequalities (Baker, 2017; Hart, 2016). These and related works challenge the ways in which aspirations are mobilized as part of racialized and class discourses within national imaginaries that advocate for changes in individual behavior without comparable devotion to the transformation of the material conditions of young people's lives. Accordingly, Appadurai (2004) asserts: 'aspirations are never simply individual. They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of life' (p. 67).

Scholarship on educational aspirations tend to focus on two core questions – the first of a comparative nature and the second of an explanatory one: 'are there between-group differences in aspirations; and do aspirations and the actions that flow from them help to explain education and economic outcomes?' (Baker, 2017, p. 1205). Accordingly, recent scholarship on aspirations offers compelling insights into how inequalities of race, class, and gender inform the development and dynamics of aspirations. As Baker (2017), Khattab (2015), among others suggest, there are notable differences in the aspirations of boys and girls, ethno-racial minorities and white students, middle-class pupils and working-class pupils. For instance, adolescent girls often have greater aspirations for higher education than their male counterparts and persist in the pursuit of such aspirations at higher rates (Schoon & Eccles, 2014). Research by Kao and Tienda (1998) and McLeod (2009) suggest that some Black, Latinx and Asian youth, especially those from immigrant backgrounds, usually express higher aspirations than their white (and native) peers, but due to limited resources are constrained in their efforts to realize their aspirations. Additionally, some working-class students hold higher aspirations than popularly perceived, but seldom access the range of economic, social and cultural capital that their middle-class peers do in schools (Ingram, 2009; Reay et al., 2005). Such differences in the aspirations of young people by race, gender and class inform the differential participation rates of select groups in higher education.

Despite the growing body of research on the aspirations of young people, to date, there remains a dearth of scholarship on the aspirations of Black immigrants in the United States. In fact, the careful, critical study of Black immigrants in US higher education – beyond media reports and one-off anecdotal observations – is very limited (Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007; Mwangi & Fries-Britt, 2015). All too little is known about the social and moral meanings Black immigrants associate with aspirations, how expressions of high aspirations are interrelated with the pursuit of ethnic identity development or how aspirations for elite higher education are perceived as useful in a process of racial uplift. This article seeks to extend the existing literature by addressing the aforementioned gaps.

Black immigrants in US higher education

Social scientific research on foreign-born Blacks in the United States dates back to the late 1930s (Reid, 1939) – though the study of their presence in US higher education is a much more recent phenomenon (Matory, 2015). Much of the early scholarship focused on Black Caribbean émigrés, with a new, steady stream of research on Black Africans developing from the early 1990s to present (Imoagene, 2012). These pioneering works often

framed Black Caribbeans as a 'Black model minority' based on their 'entrepreneurial,' 'scholarly' and 'diligent' efforts (Waters, Kasinitz, & Asad, 2014). Reid (1939), for instance, pointed out that as many as 33% of New York's highly skilled Black professionals (doctors, lawyers, etc.) were foreign-born Black Caribbeans. Subsequent works by Glazer and Moynihan (1963), along with Sowell (1975) marshaled the relative success of Black Caribbeans as evidence of the declining significance of racism in post-civil rights US society, and as an exemplary case of the agentic power of high aspirations as a derivative of 'cultural tradition' to minimize the power of racism(s) to stymie Black advancement. These often-controversial works fed into a political agenda that identified the culture of poverty as chiefly responsible for the educational and economic disadvantage of African Americans (Small, Hardin, & Lamont, 2010; Wilson, 2010). Perhaps inadvertently, such research trivialized the complexities of structural racism, reducing disadvantage to individual and group cultural pathology – or the perceptions of them.

The politicization of Black immigrants has proven to be not only a trend in the political square (Vickerman, 1999), but a controversial feature of higher education as well. Based on research by Massey et al. (2007), 'Black immigrants comprise 12% of all Black undergraduates, 27% of Black undergraduates at selective colleges, and 41% of Black undergraduates at Ivy League institutions' (Mwangi & Fries-Britt, 2015, p. 18).[3] At a reunion gathering of Harvard University's Black alumni, world-renown African American scholars Lani Guiner and Henry Louis Gates inspired a fiery debate by pointing out that most Black alumni in attendance were not of African American ancestry, but first or second-generation Black immigrants (Massey et al., 2007). Drs. Guiner and Gates maintained that the descendants of historically enslaved African Americans were not accessing elite colleges and universities at rates commensurate with the original plans for affirmative action: to redress historical disadvantage (Coleman-King, 2014; Matory, 2015; Warikoo, 2016). A divisive debate ensued in the popular press about the need to decompose the category 'Black' in reports of admitted students to ensure that admission offices at elite institutions are in pursuit of equity, as opposed to selecting the most aspirational and accomplished without consideration of historical, legal and social disadvantage the descendants of enslaved African Americans endure (Mwangi & Fries-Britt, 2015). On the other hand, others maintained that even though admission policies may not consistently meet the initial aims of affirmative action, the disproportionate presence of Black Africans and Black Caribbeans is still of considerable import to address the need for compositional diversity at historically white institutions (Warikoo, 2016).

Professors Guiner and Gates' observations about Black ethnic diversity were not only relevant to alumni convening at Harvard University, but also

applicable to Black immigrants' enrollment at a host of Ivy League and selective institutions. According to Massey et al. (2007), results from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen (NLSF) revealed that Black Caribbeans and Black Africans were over-represented at Ivy League institutions and selective colleges. Massey et al. (2007) found that one in four Black students matriculating at elite universities were immigrants or the children of immigrants. Though first and second generation Black immigrants represented only 5% of Blacks throughout the US, they accounted for nearly half of all Black undergraduates within the Ivy League. They maintained that through the admission process, some Black immigrants were assessed more favorably than their native counterparts. However, once enrolled at these selective universities 'black immigrants and natives display similar traits and characteristics and, more important, evince equal levels of academic preparation. Whatever processes operate on college campuses to depress black academic performance below that of whites with similar characteristics, they function for immigrants as well as natives' (Massey et al., 2007, p. 269). Such findings suggest that the racialized opportunity structure that informs US colleges and universities are consequential for the aspirations and achievements for all Blacks.

Discussions of the overrepresentation of Black immigrants at elite colleges and universities occasionally resurface in public discussions and university debates (Matory, 2015). For instance, when New York City high schooler and Ghanaian immigrant, Kwasi Enin, was admitted to all eight Ivy League institutions in 2014, and was described in the press as 'not a typical African-American kid' (Toppo, 2014, p. 1), old tensions resurfaced regarding the misrecognition of African Americans, wittingly or unwittingly, in the context of Black immigrant success. As John (2014, p. 1) asserts: 'The tension comes from the fact that *some* African immigrants buy into that stereotype, which gets turned into "Africans don't like black people." This has almost nothing to do with Enin…and everything to do with how America perceives and portrays black Americans and African immigrants.' At the heart of this and related debates is the sustained tension between 'redressing past wrongs' and contemporary 'diversity and inclusion,' between racial justice mandates based on US social history and racial equity demands in US higher education based on contemporary demographic shifts.

Although a small but significant body of scholarship examines the migratory transitions of immigrant youth from the historically colonial educational systems of West Africa and the Caribbean to the US school system (Hickling-Hudson, 2006; Richards, 2017), research on Black immigrant pupils' perceptions of and transitions to higher education in the US are sparse (Matory, 2015). Mwangi and Fries-Britt (2015) are among the few to urge careful consideration of the growing number of Black

immigrants pursuing higher education in the United States, their encounters with racism at historically white universities, and the influence such incidents can have on their educational aspirations and outcomes. Mwangi and Fries-Britt (2015) suggest that educational aspirations and attainment lacks the consistent power to undo anti-Black discrimination in predominantly white institutions (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018). The findings and theory discussed below complement these claims.

Ethnic projects in times of racial tension

In what ways and to what extent is ethnicity summoned as a defense against racism? For whom is such an approach profitable? For whom is it always already a failing endeavor? These and related questions are explored by sociologist Vilna Bashi Treitler in *The Ethnic Project: Transforming Racial Fiction into Ethnic Factions*. Based on an analysis of the United States' complex ethnic history, Treitler (2013) identifies ethnic projects as calculated cultural strategies and ethno-political arrangements deployed to distinguish new ethnic groups from stigmatized ones, and in so doing, increase their social status in America's racial hierarchy. Treitler (2013) asserts, 'In specific historical moments, various outsider groups undertook concerted social action (namely, an "ethnic project") to foster a perception of themselves as "different" from the bottom and "similar" to the top of that racial hierarchy' (p. 4).[4] Accordingly, ethnic projects are formed in response to ongoing racial projects in US society – a series of practices and structures that facilitate racial domination and foster perceptions of racial difference as a natural, normative arrangement (Omi & Winant, 1994). Treitler (2013) critiques ethnic projects as responses to racial inequality because though deployed in pursuit of racial uplift, they do not transform the stratified racial order. The success of ethnic projects is conditioned on the marginalization of other ethno-racial groups. As such, ethnic projects reinforce the hierarchical racial system while seeking mobility within it.

For a host of immigrant and racially marginalized groups, the political utility of ethnic projects rests in its potential success and partial rewards (Wallace, 2018b). As Treitler (2013) argues '[i]f one's project is successful, it provides group members some relief from the pejorative labels, damning prejudices, and exclusionary practices that had originally plagued the group' (p. 4). Treitler's (2013) ethnic project theory suggests that ethno-racial mythmaking is central to how groups are differentially recognized in the racial order. The ideas ethnic groups create and/or circulate about themselves are often consequential for public perceptions of them. Put plainly, as minority groups vie for enhanced status in a context of racial stigma, some groups claim and assert ethnic

distinctiveness (through employment, earnings, investments, political participation, and attitudes). Some may also commit to complimentary 'model minority' claims as a way to differentially incorporate themselves in US society. Black immigrants, for instance, have historically invested stock in being regarded as Black model minorities or as industrious migrants even if these discursive formulations are selective suppositions, gross generalizations, or patronizing celebrations (Ifantunji, 2016, 2017; Imoagene, 2017; Model, 2008a). Such narrative claims about Black immigrants are features of what Treitler (2013) regards as 'ethnic marketing campaigns' used to strategically alter racial perceptions.

But ethnic projects are seldom, if ever, fully successful for Black immigrants. Though Black immigrants have been deemed a Black model minority for several decades (Ifantunji, 2016),[5] Treitler (2013) identifies Black immigrants generally, and Black Caribbeans specifically, as experiencing a 'struggling ethnic project.' Treitler (2013) reasons: 'In a place and time where phenotype reigns, West Indians [Black Caribbeans] would be wholly unsuccessful in petitioning for white status. But certainly, they too have been known to distance themselves from African Americans' (p. 131). Ethnic projects promoted by Black Caribbeans and other Black immigrants allow them to distinguish themselves from African Americans, particularly the African American poor in urban contexts. However, the durability of anti-Blackness in US society constrains the progress (real or perceived) forged through ethnic projects. This is because Blackness – or more precisely, interpretations and experiences of it as a stigmatized somatic signifier in the US political economy – regularly underwrites discrimination, disadvantage, and debasement in social institutions (Dumas, 2016; Moten, 2013; Treviño, Harris, & Wallace, 2008; Wallace, 2018b). In this regard, ethnicity does not consistently thwart anti-Black racial logics (Wallace, 2017a, 2019).

Its substantive analytical contributions notwithstanding, Treitler's (2013) ethnic project theory hardly offers any insights into how education generally, and schooling specifically, functions as a mechanism of racialization. This paper extends Treitler's (2013) ethnic project theory by examining how reputation campaigns for Black immigrants are promoted and sustained through the pursuit of education and the declaration of high educational aspirations. In particular, I consider how aspirations for elite higher education are mobilized in service of ongoing ethnic projects and related myth-making exercises to shore up perceptions of Black immigrants as moral migrants fit for inclusion in US society.

Research methods

Data presented in this piece are drawn from 48 one-on-one, in-depth interviews conducted with Black African and Caribbean boys between

2013 and 2016. The primary aim of these interviews was to address the following research question: what are the educational experiences of Black immigrant and second-generation boys in New York City public schools? To ascertain insights into participants' social and scholastic experiences, interviews were conducted in three phases. In the first, I interviewed 15 second-generation Black Caribbean male adolescents to better understand their educational experiences and plans for higher education as part of a larger comparative ethnographic study. In the second phase, I interviewed 9 second-generation Black African boys in order to understand the details and dynamics of their educational experiences along with their anticipated prospects for higher education. In the third phase, I interviewed participants a second time during their final year in secondary school, after the university admission cycle. Interviews were conducted in classrooms after school, in community spaces during the weekends and in some instances, inside participants' homes.

Participants were recruited in two distinct stages. At Bridgewood, all 383 Black Caribbean pupils in Years 10 and 11 were invited to complete a screening questionnaire to identify those who were second-generation. The 15 Black Caribbean males discussed in this work are part of the 30 students overall who agreed to engage in one-on-one interviews after participating in focus group discussions. The nine Black African boys in this study were also in Year 10 and 11 and were recruited through snowball sampling with the assistance of some Black Caribbean participants, and a group of Black African boys from the soccer team who urged me to explore the connections and differences between Black Caribbean and Black African boys at Bridgewood.[6] All the Caribbean participants are children of immigrants; six of the Black African boys are immigrants who arrived in the US before the age of five and one arrived at age 13. The 24 participants in this study, ages 15–17 when the project began, are the children of one or more parents from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados, St. Lucia, Guyana, Antigua, Grenada, Montserrat, and the Bahamas. Of the 24 participants, 13 were classified as middle class and 11 as working class, not based on income, but based on parents' educational levels, professional rank, and self-identification.

All participants were students at Bridgewood, one of the few remaining large public secondary schools in New York City. Founded in the 1970s, Bridgewood primarily served the white working classes in its first two decades, but since the early 1990s, the school has diversified considerably due to hyper-segregation in local residential arrangements. As middle class and working class white Americans moved from the edge of New York City's urban core to neighboring suburbs in the late 1970s and 1980s, African Americans, Black immigrants, and Latinx families migrated into the northern, southern and eastern regions of the

borough and in the school's catchment area in search of more affordable houses and new ethnic enclaves beyond New York City's central business districts. A school that was once over 90% white, Bridgewood is now nearly 98% Black and Latinx, with white students accounting for less than 1% of the student population despite the presence of university preparatory, honors and Advanced Placement programs. Additionally, over 55% of students qualified for free and reduced-price lunches in 2013, with 51% of pupils in public schools qualifying across the US and over 70% qualifying across New York City (Rich, 2015).

At each phase of the project, all participants discussed in this article completed research disclosure documents and returned parental consent forms, in keeping with ethical approval from the New York City Board of Education. As a Caribbean immigrant to New York City, I straddled an insider-outsider status with the second-generation Caribbean boys, some of whom found me as culturally non-American as their parents and at times socially congruent to them because we shared similar music tastes and dress styles in the local community. Pseudonyms are used for research sites, participants' names, and in some instances, even specific references to participants' hometowns to ensure anonymity, confidentiality and the protection of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

In-depth interviews with participants lasted between 55 and 90 min, with the average interview lasting just over an hour. All interviews were digitally audiotaped, professionally transcribed and repeatedly analyzed with the use of NVivo qualitative software. Based on a modified grounded theory approach, I first read the transcripts carefully for layered contextual meaning. I then used open codes with broad categories like 'plans for elite private colleges and universities' and eventually developed focused codes such as 'being a good immigrant in school' to further explore the specific dimensions of Black immigrant boys' educational experiences. Through this iterative coding process, core themes emerged about immigrant motivations for the American dream, the constraints of racially segregated schools, and the 'aspiration anxieties' that develop based on a clash between 'desire[s] for educational advancement and structural disadvantage…between long-held dreams of social mobility and stalled upward mobility' (Wallace, 2017b, p. 57). In the remaining portions of this article, I focus on the themes related to participants' aspirations for elite higher education and social mobility, along with the moral meanings associated with them.

Findings

The findings of this qualitative study suggest that in a context of rising xenophobia and continued stereotypes of Blacks in the US, participants' aspirations for elite higher education served two key purposes: (1) to

enhance their individual and ethnic reputations, and (2) to justify emigration to and worth within the US. To this end, the ethnic project participants promoted also functioned as a moral project. The descriptive results indicate that all 24 participants planned on attending top colleges and universities as an expression of their educational aspirations. But while 20 of the 24 participants hoped to enroll at Ivy League or top-ranked, elite liberal arts institutions like Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Duke, Williams, and Haverford, none of them earned admission to these schools. Their ethnic project did not afford them the success they anticipated. The sections that follow explore aspirations first as a measure of making meaning of a morality and then as a constitutive feature of ethnic projects.

Aspirations: a moral project

All 24 participants performed aspirations as a strategy to distinguish themselves (and their families) as moral migrants, albeit to different degrees. The designation 'moral migrants' deployed throughout this work is not principally about legal status, but about what participants presume mainstream institutions and elite schools in US society desire for admission and acceptance (Richards, 2013; Treitler, 2013). Participants understood moral migrants as those who *expressed and pursued* high educational aspirations, held pro-school attitudes, earned meaningful employment, followed the law, contributed financially to relatives in their homelands and resisted reliance on the public purse. As Shane, a working-class Jamaican-American, puts it: '...You have to be one of the good immigrants...you have to be a good example, you feel me?' As complements to their curricular performance and co-curricular engagement, participants like Emmanuel, Ishmael, Darrick and Shane discussed in this section, presumed that being moral migrants – or what they like Shane regularly regarded as being 'good immigrants' – earned them respect in their local communities and made them all the more marketable for higher education. Extracts from interviews with the aforementioned participants are selected because they typify the views held by their fellow participants, all of whom confirmed their investments in being 'good immigrants'. Consider, for instance, the perspectives of Emmanuel, a working-class Nigerian-American student who wished to attend Harvard:

> "...In America...you have to show that you're a good immigrant and finally prove that you really deserved to come to America...you have to prove...that you are the kind of immigrant going after the American Dream and not on welfare... you have to show them that you work hard... you can't just be another Black kid if you want to get in a place like Harvard or just get ahead in this country...you have to make your family here really proud...and show that we Nigerians are successful and powerful people."

Ishmael, a middle-class American-born Ghanaian who had hoped to attend an elite, private liberal arts institution, advanced a view similar to Emmanuel's. He explained:

> "…I'm like, at the end of the day, having ambition, high goals and big dreams is really not about me. It's about my family and showing that we belong here in America as Ghanaians and Africans…a really good way to show this is to get into one of these top schools … That is why I am not afraid to tell people I want to go to Williams or Princeton…it shows them what we Africans who come here, study and work hard are made of and that we make this country better… Like, I don't know why people forget that Obama is the son of an African who came to America to study…"

The symbolic and political value of expressing high educational aspirations as a moral, meaning-making project are not exclusive to Black African boys, of course. However, as the children of Black immigrants, Black African and Caribbean boys in this study note the importance of distinguishing themselves in a politicized moral hierarchy in which they feel they are subjugated by virtue of their race and immigrant status. In a context of rising xenophobia and increased rates of immigrant deportation between 2013 and 2016 when fieldwork was conducted (Foner, 2018), Black Caribbean adolescents like Darrick, Shane, and their contemporaries, espoused similar views about the power of high educational aspirations and admission to elite universities. The following extract from an interview with Darrick illuminates the social and political stakes of aspirations as a moral resource for presumably 'redeeming' participants' status as Blacks and immigrants.

> "…Nowadays, as a black man and as a[n] immigrant, you have two strikes against you. It's even worse if you don't have papers [are undocumented]…it's all over the news…you can get deported any time…but you can change things a little when you tell people 'round here that you want to go to college or to a place like Yale…That just shows what kind of black man you are, what kind of family you are from and that you are the kind of immigrant this country really should have here…"

Offering a complementary analysis to Darrick's perspectives, Shane, a working class pupil of Jamaican heritage whose sights were set on attending Princeton, argued:

> "…When I tell people in the bus or at the store that I'm studying to go to Princeton, everything changes…You become a better person because you become driven, hard-working, passionate…you start to prove to yourself and to other people that you should go to one of these schools and that you have more than a right to be in America… Plus, people start to look at you different… they say, hey, this is a Black Jamaican kid who's goin' somewhere great..that's what we West Indians [Caribbeans] are about."

The aforementioned comments from Shane, Darrick, Ishmael, and Emmanuel extend the scope of the literature on aspirations by highlighting the moral meanings associated with their aspirations for elite higher education (Baker, 2017). While the moral implications of policies framing young people's aspirations in deficit terms have been documented in the UK (Baker, 2017; Spohrer, 2011; Strand & James, 2008), commentary from Shane, Darrick, Ishmael and Emmanuel complicate the existing literature by suggesting that a refined moral character could mitigate the doxic perceptions associated with Black and immigrant identities in the US (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Deer, 2008). For these participants and their peers, aspirations for elite higher education function as more than a mere decorative discourse in pursuit of social mobility (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Shah, Dwyer, & Modood, 2010). Instead, the aspirations held by Black immigrants function as resources to deflect potential claims of their illegality, illegitimacy, and ill repute. The expressive and performative moral codes participants attach to being 'good immigrants' are best understood in a wider sociopolitical context of xenophobic policies and pronouncements, and the disproportionate disregard for and deadly shootings of Blacks in a purportedly post-racial America (Avdija, 2014; Moten, 2013; Wallace, 2018a). Declaring high aspirations in a segregated, over-policed, resource-constrained neighborhood aligns participants with dominant institutions of power and honor like elite colleges and universities (Anderson, 1999, 2009). The kind of morality pursued by participants is not one rooted in piety necessarily, but politics – one that seems to celebrate ethno-cultural character irrespective of sociopolitical conditions. More specifically, participants espouse what might be regarded as a *constrained political morality* – a set of logics that (over)emphasizes individual, educational, and market-based behaviors of Black immigrants based on a political context that prioritizes certain economic migrants, as exemplified in Donald Trump's controversial remarks about African and Haitian immigrants (Matory, 2015).

Aspirations for ethnic projects

Individual moral projects shore up group-based ethnic projects. Moral projects legitimate ethnic projects as earned arrangements based on perceptions of 'worthiness' and 'hard work.' As the findings of this piece suggest, educational aspirations play a key role in shaping the moral projects tethered to ethnic projects. Ethnic projects are, as Treitler (2013) argues, discursive and political formulations that designate select groups as distinctive, accomplished, exemplary, and thus deserving, minorities by virtue of their educational, career and civic success. For Black immigrants, ethnic projects are psychic and material strategies to avoid last place ranking in US society – to promote intra-racial ethnic differences that

distinguish new groups from historically stigmatized ones. Matory (2015) maintains that 'For many black immigrants and natives, the best strategic option seems to be the establishment of an alternative collective identity whose dignity can be highlighted through its distinction from African Americans' (p. 2). Excerpts from the research interviews below complement and extend this claim by highlighting the role of educational aspirations in ethnic improvement campaigns through the pursuit of higher education.

Shane, Ishmael, and Emmanuel along with 15 of their peers all gesture towards aligning their aspirations and academic performance to the purported accomplishments of their respective ethnic groups. Highlighting 'what we West Indians [Caribbeans] are about,' according to Shane, or 'show[ing] that we Nigerians are successful and powerful people' from Emmanuel's perspective, as noted in the previous sections, subjects each group to degrees of homogenization that undermines the significance of in-group diversity. The interview extracts below further complicate understandings of ethnic projects and participants' investments in them:

> Caribbean people stand out in America. We are hardworking…If you talk to the average Caribbean kid, like, they will tell you they want to go to college or make something of themselves. I stick with people like that who are trying to go somewhere in life. (Miguel, working class second-generation Jamaican-American)

> Growing up, my parents always tell me I was different from the Black American kids on my block…My Dad always told me that West Indians [Black Caribbeans] worked hard to get here [US], working multiple jobs, going to school, sending money home…you know, really going for the American Dream. We can't afford to play around. We have to work hard to stay here and get somewhere. That's why I work hard because Caribbean people work so hard. I'm going to go to college and do big things. (Andrew, middle class second-generation Afro-Indo-Trinidadian-American)

> …You already know what I think about Caribbean people, and even some African people. We are the Black Asians…we are smart, we work hard and we're cool. It's funny, but it's for real. I have a lot to live up to…that's why I want to go to a really good college, to really prove what I am made of. (Dwayne, middle class second-generation Grenadian-American)

> People have a lot of bad things to say about African people, but they know we work hard…So many Nigerians are doctors, lawyers, and engineers…I have to work hard to show that I'm really Nigerian. The best way to do that is to go to a good school, like Harvard or Stanford. College is a must, or you're not really Nigerian. (Odi, working class Nigerian immigrant)

> Back home, my family didn't have these opportunities, but here in the US, you can get lots of scholarships to go to college…I look at other Africans and see that a lot of them are successful…success is possible… so I'm going for it. Education is a big step in the whole process of success…I stick to other Africans to make

> sure I get the right inspiration for college and for life. I want to go to a really good school…Not a lot of Black Americans think that way. You bring something different to the table if you are African and not American. (Solomon, middle class Kenyan immigrant)

The interview excerpts above represent numerous such exemplars from participants' interviews in which they highlight the role of higher education in mobilizing ethnic projects for future cultural and material gain. As Miguel, Andrew, Dwayne, Odi and Solomon all make clear, their moral claims about being 'hardworking' inform – and are informed by – a wider ethnic project about their ethno-national group's success and barriers to it. Participants suggest that while success for Black immigrants is not automatic, it is accessible and expected. But the notion that high educational aspirations are wholly emblematic of African and Caribbean immigrants in the US is a fictional formula (Imoagene, 2017; Matory, 2015; Model, 1991, 2008a) – an aspiration amnesia of sorts that strategically elides the diverse degrees of aspirations and achievement in the homeland. Treitler (2013), Matory (2015), Model (2008a), among others, suggest that there is hardly anything distinctive about the cultural constitution of Caribbean and African ethnicities that make having high aspirations, natural and normative across time and space. Black immigrants framed as a more aspirational group of Blacks in the popular press based on their 'culture' is often about a selective, middle-class group from that culture with the social and economic capital to emigrate (Foner, 1998; Ifantunji, 2017; Model, 2008b).[7] For instance, in a study of the relationship between African Americans, Black Africans and Black Caribbeans at Howard University – arguably the most popular co-educational historically Black college in the United States – Matory (2015) highlights the need to further complicate narratives of Black immigrants' ethnic distinctiveness by considering the role of social class. He argues: 'what is described in Jamaica and Trinidad as "middle-class" values – respect for monogamous marriage, the exam school, home ownership, and speaking "the Queen's English" – is, in the United States, described as "Caribbean culture," as though working class… and oppositional culture were somehow foreign to the Caribbean and its diaspora…' (Matory, 2015, p. 368). Based on his multi-year ethnography at Howard University, Matory (2015) observes that Black Caribbeans and Africans mobilize narratives of ethnic difference that mask, undermine or perhaps more precisely, ignore, the consequential role of class in what is regarded as an exclusively ethnic project.

The data presented above also confirm two key features of Treitler's (2013) theory on ethnic differentiation – that ethnic projects are comparative and consequential. Firstly, ethnic projects are comparative in that ethno-cultural groups like Black Caribbeans and Black Africans consistently engage in a process of distancing themselves from historically

stigmatized groups and associating themselves with celebrated ones. Andrew's claim that he is 'different from the Black American kids on [his] block' and Dwayne's plea that 'Caribbean people, and even some African people… are the Black Asians' bring into vivid focus the comparisons ethnic projects promote. Secondly, ethnic projects are consequential, not because they consistently yield positive outcomes, but to the extent that they influence ethnic minorities beliefs and behaviors. Miguel's argument that 'the average Caribbean kid…want[s] to go to college' and Solomon's view that 'a lot of [Africans] are successful' influence them to pursue success through higher education.

Until they achieve the success expected of them, participants like Miguel, Andrew, Dwayne, Odi and Solomon draw on their educational aspirations as part of a performative script in a larger ethno-cultural valuation scheme to signal the value of their ethno-cultural identities and worthiness as immigrants.

Beyond moral migrants: towards an inclusive political project for all Black lives

The foregoing sections illuminate the ways in which Black African and Caribbean boys' aspirations for elite higher education are constitutive features of individual moral projects in service of group-based ethnic projects. For the participants discussed throughout this piece, educational aspirations served two central purposes: (1) to enhance their individual and ethnic reputations, and (2) to justify emigration to and worth within the United States. High educational aspirations functioned not only as an index of character, but also as a signifier of Black immigrants' cultural and political value in xenophobic times.

The social construction of 'good immigrants' or 'moral migrants' is problematic for at least three reasons. First, while participants' commitment to constructing themselves as 'good immigrants' and worthy ethnic minorities went beyond the boundaries of legality and citizenship, they also gave heed to elitist and assimilationist impulses that render the full acceptance of Blackness conditional, contingent on a set of interests in 'really good schools,' 'hard work,' and more. Second, the designation 'good immigrants' renews xenophobic claims regarding who is and who is not worthy of immigration. It creates a moral ideal type and a performative cultural script for testing the value of migrants and the merits of their entry into the United States. Third, while participants invest in increasing their individual social status and their ethnic reputations, they do so explicitly at the expense of their less aspirational Black peers in their local communities. In fact, the distinctiveness participants pursued through the expression of high aspirations is a relational construction

that capitalizes on Black pathology and social suffering. According to Pierre (2004), narratives of "cultural distinctiveness perpetuate a form of racism under a theory that denies the relevance of race while it continuously recodes the biological notions of race as 'culture.' Thus, Black immigrant distinctiveness, when presented through the prism of the cultural narratives of ethnicity, allows for the perpetuation of 'cultural racism' (Pierre, 2004, p. 141). While aspirations aided in moral boundary work and assisted participants in negotiating existing racial hierarchies of worth among immigrants and Black youth in their local communities, such efforts simultaneously reinforced racism of a different kind.

In summary, the moral and ethnic projects that participants promote are ostensibly reactions to racialization and strategies for managing their marginalization. Ethnic projects and their related registers of meaning do not challenge the hierarchical racial order. In fact, they fortify prevailing logics of the racial arena. With ethnic projects, Black immigrants pursue distinction and success based on another Black group's stigmatization and failure. While such discursive arrangements are advantageous for Black immigrants, engaging in moral and ethnic classification schemes limits the full flourishing of all Black lives.

Notes

1. In keeping with immigration studies scholarship, I define Black immigrants here and throughout this work as foreign-born voluntary migrants who leave their homelands primarily in pursuit of family reunification, economic gains and/or educational opportunities. Whereas Black immigrants come to the US from various parts of the world, I focus here on ones from the Anglophone Caribbean and select parts of West Africa – regions shaped by colonial encounters and ongoing neocolonial arrangements. For more details see Foner (2018), Imoagene (2017) and Waters et al. (2014).
2. Here, and throughout this paper, I use the term 'public school' to refer to government-managed schools, or what would be regarded as 'state schools' in the UK.
3. In US higher education, the 'Ivy League' refers to eight longstanding, elite universities widely regarded for their highly selective admission, institutional wealth, and social prestige. Located in the Northeastern section of the United States, Ivy League institutions include Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania and Yale University.
4. This claim is of considerable analytical import because it marshals the complexity of US ethnic history to underscore the fact that intra-group distinctions are not unique to Blacks, nor are they predicated definitively on self-hatred or internalized racism. The nature of the US racial project has urged multiple ethno-racial groups to pursue whiteness, and/or distinguish themselves from historically stigmatized groups (Omi & Winant, 1994). Therefore, Black immigrants' attempts to differentiate themselves from African Americans in contexts that prove advantageous for Black immigrants is a prejudicial and highly problematic arrangement of which I am critical. Scholars

such as Treitler (2013), however, take issue with such distancing practices whether pursued by Black immigrants or any other ethno-racial group (i.e. Latinx, Jewish and Asian people).

5. Recent research by Model (2008a); Waters (1999); Ifatunji (2018), among others, calls into question the extent to which Black Caribbeans are Black model minorities at all, and note the declining premium of Caribbean ethnicity as a marker of positive distinction in the US.
6. Though I initially recruited 15 Black African boys to participate in the study, three did not receive parental consent to continue with follow-up interviews in the second year, two no longer had an interest in the study, and one returned to Nigeria long-term and as such was not available to participate. The 24 participants included in this study of Black immigrant boys are ones who participated in two rounds of interviews over three years.
7. Black immigrants who emigrate in pursuit of economic opportunities are often highly aspirational, highly motivated, and well equipped with the requisite social, cultural and economic capital to transition effectively from their homelands to a new host society.

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