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Racialization and Black multiplicity: Generative paradigms for understanding Black immigrants

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Abstract

Black immigrants occupy a liminal space on the race ethnicity spectrum that defies traditional assimilation theories. The social distancing paradigm has emerged as one of the most influential theories to address this shortcoming in the field and explain the incorporation of Black immigrants. However, because this paradigm implicitly rests on an analogy to White immigrants, the articulation of Black ethnic options can often times be more derivative than generative. As a result, accounts of Black immigrant racialization reify provincialized notions of Blackness by relying on problematic comparisons to African American culture and outcomes. In this paper, I argue that moving away from these provincialized characterizations of Blackness requires building on theories of immigrant racialization that take Black multiplicities as its starting point. This review takes up that perspective in analyzing how narratives of Blackness emerge in segmented, classic, canonical, and neoclassical theories of assimilation. I then map out some theoretical and empirical trends that emerge across three waves of Black immigrant research agendas and outline the need to move beyond the White immigrant analogy in order to more aptly redefine Black immigrants for future research.

1 | INTRODUCTION

How should we understand contemporary Black immigrants? Are they African Americans with foreign backgrounds? Are they more like Black Americans or more like non-Black immigrants? Should they be understood in reference to African Americans at all? And if so, how? The sociology of immigration has been grappling with these questions of

Black immigrant incorporation since the demographic increase of this population following the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act. Obviously, the realities of racial oppression, and anti-Black racism specifically, make it impossible to ignore the similar situations Black Americans and Black immigrants face in the United States. Less obvious, however, is how we ought to approach interrogating those situations of interpersonal and structural racism, the relationships between Black Americans and Black immigrants, and the various ways these groups relate to a range of Black identities. Early anthologies on Black immigrants (Sutton & Chaney, 1987) noted that Black Caribbean immigrants incorporated into society by becoming African American, but with shifting race relations and increasing demographics, they now have wider incorporation options (Vickerman, 2016, p. 75). In pursuing these options, scholars have consistently found that Black immigrants define themselves against Black Americans, as exceptional blacks (Greer, 2013; Imoagene, 2017; Waters, 1999). This process has been referred to as social distancing, and it is often cited as the defining characteristic of Black immigrant identity (Jackson, 2010). Yet, it raises questions about whether this is the primary or even the most significant way that Black immigrants define themselves. Are there other ways scholars should be attending to the way that Black immigrants define themselves that go beyond the distancing paradigm? Does failing to move beyond the distancing paradigm reify parochial and monolithic notions of blackness?

This article begins to address these questions through the lens of Black multiplicities, which requires starting with the basic premise that Blacks are not a monolith and involves analytically centering Black regional, cultural, political, and ethnic multiplicities (Robinson, 2014). Taking multiple modalities of Blackness seriously means moving beyond narratives that equate Blackness with being or becoming African American and the singular meaning of African American. Operationalizing Black multiplicities, in the sociology of immigration, requires drawing from theories of racialization rather than theories of assimilation. Racialization is the way that people and groups are absorbed into hierarchical racial systems by racial assignment and categorization (Bashi Treitler, 2015). Black immigrants come from countries, where they are assigned to racial categories within hierarchical systems. Kusow and Eno (2015), for instance, take the case of stratification in Somalia to show how narratives of Somaliness are deployed at individual, group, and institutional levels to oppress Somali Bantus and other Somali minorities, who are said to be more African in their appearance than typical Somalis. While this process of racialization happens in their country of origin, it also reemerged during resettlement into refugee camps and again when they relocated to the United States.

Classic, neoclassical, and segmented assimilation theories generally explain the, often one-way, process of immigrants incorporating into U.S. society and rarely center the premigration racialization process nor the process of refugees or asylum seekers. Roth (2012) and Bonilla-Silva (2002) highlight the way assimilation theories provide limited articulations of Blackness and have failed to explain the racial schemas immigrants bring with them from their country of origin and how they play out in the U.S. racial context. While both racialization and assimilation consider how race figures into the incorporation process, scholars such as Parham (2017), Bashi Treitler (2015), and Jung (2009, 2015) argue that only the former challenges the racial status quo by centering the problem of White supremacy in addressing racial inequality.

The goal of this article is to echo the increasing call to center theories of racialization, rather than assimilation, in assessing the incorporation of Black and non-Black immigrants alike. Because racialization considers the way colonialism and diaspora operate in producing Black multiplicities, it captures the spatial and temporal complexity of Blackness that is, otherwise, marginalized in assimilation theories. This approach has the potential to move the sociology of immigration towards theorizing broader alternative trajectories for contemporary immigrants of color (Imoagene, 2017; Parham, 2017) than currently offered by reigning assimilation theories or social distancing.

This article reviews the growing field of Black immigrant studies, to show how contemporary research on the lives and experiences of this group begins to move us away from monolithic articulations of Blackness and closer to operationalizing Black multiplicities. Recent scholarship has been more apt to note that as Black African and Caribbean immigrants become a more pronounced demographic and start to develop an ethnic voice organized around peculiar concerns, we should expect to see the gradual diminution—of a monolithic African American Blackness (Vickerman, 2016, p. 75) in social and political arenas (Greer, 2013; Rogers, 2006; Smith, 2014; Wright Austin, 2018). I begin by briefly discussing Robinson's (2014) concept of Black multiplicities to show why it provides

an analytical alternative to addressing the shortcomings of both implicit and explicit monolithic articulations of Blackness. Then, I offer an overview of segmented, classic, canonical, and neoclassical theories of assimilation to identify the way narratives of blackness emerge in each of these approaches. Next, I outline three waves of Black immigrant research—contemporary scholarship from the turn of the 21st century, the field's historical antecedent, and current studies published within the last 20 years. In the last section, I explain the difficulty of robustly and consistently defining Black immigrants for empirical studies and the need to move beyond the White immigrant analogy in order to more aptly redefine Black immigrants for future research.

2 | BLACK MULTIPLICITIES

Black multiplicities refers to the numerous analytical distinctions that separate Blacks. Black identities cannot be reduced to single demographic dimensions such as the Black middle class, the Black south, or Black immigrants. In other words, Black multiplicities does not simply mean Black diversity. We know that Black people, like any other racialized group of people, are incredibly diverse. But simply documenting the typologies of Blackness and the range of differences among Black people does not sufficiently capture the analytical interactions between various sociocultural and structural factors that produce Black multiplicities. A host of rich empirical studies reveal that there are indeed multiple souths (Hunter & Robinson, 2018; Robinson, 2014), multiple modalities of class (Clerge, 2014; Lacy, 2007; Pattillo, 1999), and multiple Black immigrant statuses (Golash-Boza, 2012; Jones, 2013). These multiplicities intersect to produce complex Black identities (Robinson, 2014, p. 3), outcomes, intraracial and intraethnic conflicts, and responses to structural oppression.

Because Black multiplicities, like intersectionality, is an analytical framework that explores the complexities of Blackness, it stands in contrast to monolithic constructions of Blackness. It goes beyond mere acknowledgements of Black diversity, which takes race as a master status and then subsequently incorporates considerations of gender, sexuality, ability, class, immigration status, and other variables. Multiplicities allow us to start with the assumption that a range of variables is already embedded within narratives of Blackness. This distinction between diversity and multiplicities is an important one because the former can easily lend itself to the misreading that Black immigrants are diversifying African American culture (i.e., Caribbeanization of African American culture) when in fact complex diversity already exists. By drawing from multiplicities, we can attend to the interactions that engender multiple forms of being, rather than implicitly limiting us to singular narratives of Blackness.

3 | NARRATIVES OF BLACKNESS IN ASSIMILATION THEORIES

3.1 | Segmented assimilation theory

In the sociology of immigration, the problem of a singular narrative as the proximal baseline for Blackness emerges quite explicitly in the theory of segmented assimilation. Segmented assimilation posits three distinct racialized paths for future generations of contemporary immigrants. The first path leads to upward mobility into a White middle class; the second path leads to maintenance of ethnic community and values; and the third path leads to downward mobility into the Black underclass (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997). The theory has faced countless criticisms (see Imoagene, 2017; Jung, 2009, 2015; Neckerman, Carter, & Lee, 1999; Vickerman, 2016) for conceptualizing Blackness within the culture of poverty paradigm (Jung, 2009; McKee, 1993; Model, 2008; Pierre, 2004). Thus, the paradigmatic case of Blackness that segmented assimilation theory uses is that of the poor, politically disenfranchised, northern, urban dwelling, descendants of U.S. slavery (Robinson, 2014). As a result, Black ethnic heterogeneity has been subsumed under this singular definition of Blackness because Blacks are not imagined as having to negotiate immigrant status'.

3.2 | Classic assimilation theories

While segmented assimilation is perhaps the most popular version of contemporary assimilation theory, one of the oldest iterations is classic assimilation theory, which dates back to the Chicago School. Robert Park and his Chicago School colleagues articulated and elaborated at least three related theories of assimilation. Early conceptualizations were laid out in the *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921) and in the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* in (1932), and a later iteration appeared in a posthumous anthology of Park's essays *Race and Culture* (1950). Park and Burgess (1921) initially defined assimilation as "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons or groups, and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (p. 736). A decade later, Park (1932) similarly defined assimilation "as the process or processes by which peoples of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence" (Park, 1932, p. 282). Alba and Nee (2003) argue that the early Chicago School definitions allow for the persistence of ethnic distinctions in immigrants. And they lament that the enduring legacy of the concept is the one later articulated that defines assimilation as an inevitable outcome in the race relations cycle. This latter conceptualization of assimilation has drawn notable critiques from sociology of race scholars (see McKee, 1993; Steinberg, 2007) and has been virtually abandoned by that subfield. Sociology of immigration, however, continues to draw on the early iterations of Park's concept but more so in its revived form as put forth by Alba and Nee (2003) in *Remaking the American Mainstream*, which I discuss in a later section.

Early iterations of the assimilation theory that emerged from the Chicago School's observations of the urban environment rely on analogizing the incorporation pathway of Black migrants from the rural South to White immigrant peasants from Southern and Eastern Europe (see Park, Burgess, McKenzie, & Wirth, 1925; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918). Tchen argues that Chicago served as the laboratory that forced all migrants through the same theoretical sieve (Siu & Tchen, 1987, p. xxix). Another important empirical site that classic assimilation theory emerged from was New England; it operated as the basis for Warner and Srole's (1945) study of immigrant incorporation. They made sharper distinctions between the assimilation trajectories among White immigrants, arguing that the pace of incorporation for some dark-skinned Europeans could be slow if not downright improbable. Needless to say, the assimilation prospects for Blacks were improbable.

The historical legacy of assimilation theory is rooted in these early empirical studies of European immigrants. According to Parham (2017), the enduring "reliance on experience of European newcomers is problematic because those migrations posed very different issues than do the current migrations of people of color" (p. 3). Moreover, the Eurocentric framework neglects alternative historiographies, which explore the relationship of various Blacks to each other and lend theoretical insight to contemporary processes of immigrant racialization (ibid).

3.3 | Canonical assimilation theories

The most enduring synthesis of contemporary assimilation theory comes from Milton Gordon's (1964) *Assimilation in American* because it lends itself to quantitative analysis (Alba & Nee, 2003). The first step of assimilation in Gordon's multidimensional model is acculturation. Acculturation into mainstream society requires that immigrants conform to middle-class Anglo-Saxon values. This framework exhibits similar problems as the classical assimilation theories because it relies on a Eurocentric framework in defining the core of U.S. society as White.

3.4 | Neoclassical assimilation theories

Alba and Nee's (2003) neoclassical assimilation theory pushes against the idea that the American mainstream should be defined by Eurocentric standards. Instead, they argue that immigrants and the societies they incorporate into experience mutual cultural shifts, thereby reducing ethnic distinctions and lowering barriers of exclusion from the

mainstream. By drawing from the early iterations of the Chicago School's definition of assimilation—that allows for the persistence of ethnic distinctions in immigrants—they attempt to revive the concept and rescue it from its problematic Eurocentric entanglements. However, reducing ethnic distinctions is not the same as addressing the problem of racial inequality and domination. Jung (2009) notes that inequality and domination are not synonyms for difference. "Inequality and domination do produce and may even presuppose difference, but to examine inequality and domination *as* difference risks mischaracterization or, worse, trivialization" (Jung, 2009, p. 381). In this regard, while neoclassical assimilation theory illuminates the problem of race in society, and even challenges the Eurocentric framing of previous assimilation theories, it does not center the problem of race sufficiently enough to explain racialization nor the constraints racial inequities impose (Bashi Treitler, 2015, p.159) on immigrants' ability to incorporate into society. With respect to addressing narratives of Blackness, the neoclassical articulation pushes Blacks to the margins of the mainstream in their assimilation paradigm, whereas the empirical studies of the classical Chicago School attempted to push them through the assimilation paradigm (see Park et al., 1925).

4 | BLACK IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION: CONTEMPORARY, HISTORICAL, AND CURRENT STUDIES

Black immigrants mark a decidedly distinct racial demographic than the earlier generations of White European immigrants, who were the basis for classic and canonical assimilation theories. Segmented and neoclassical assimilation theories address the conceptual shortcoming of classic and canonical theories by shifting their empirical focus to immigrants of color from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia. But in the process, they arguably castigate and marginalize Blackness. Despite the tendency of assimilation theories to cast Black ethnicity as exogenous rather than integral to Blackness, early scholarship on Black immigrants couched the discussion of this demographic within assimilation frameworks. But they did not adopt these theories wholesale, instead they critically examined the limits of assimilation theories, turned problematic assumptions on their head, and charted out new territory to build new theory. For example, Waters' (1999) finding that Black immigrants maintain their ethnic identity as they achieve middle class status is a significant point of departure from Warner and Srole's (1945) work on White immigrants, whom they found ceded their cultural mores as they attained upward mobility. Waters' findings illuminate how classic assimilation theories failed to account for the way race mediates the relationship between class and incorporation. Her findings also intersect with the segmented assimilation model to show the range of incorporation trajectories for Black immigrants, not just a downward trajectory predetermined by race. Those contemporary studies on Black immigrants from 20 years ago contended with assimilation theories and latent concerns of political conservatives, who would tout Black immigrants as exceptional. But current studies on Black immigrants go a step further in centering race by drawing from critical race theories, fine tuning measures of incorporation, and interrogating variables of nationality that were glossed over in the previous era of research. I do not review the empirical details of each of these studies, instead I assess how current research reframes narratives of Blackness to account for multiplicities.

4.1 | Contemporary studies on Black immigrants

Mary Waters' (1999) widely received *Black Identities* has perhaps had the most notable impact on subsequent studies of Black immigrants in the United States. Her work joined contemporary scholarship that explored the lives of English-speaking Black immigrants in New York (Foner, 2001; Kasinitz, 1992; Vickerman, 1999; Watkins-Owens, 1996). Apart from Watkins-Owens (1996) historical work, these studies primarily addressed the era of immigration following the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, but preceding 9/11, and they continue to frame current debates in the field.

In addition to time, place, and demographics, these studies also centered questions of intraracial dynamics between African Americans and Afro-Caribbean immigrants. They often explicitly focused on the conditions that lead Black immigrants to either identify with or distance themselves from their proximal hosts. Waters points to the

way racial oppression and class resources shape the identity options of Black immigrants. She found that working-class, second-generation, Black immigrants believed that their ethnic background provided them little to no advantages, and so they identified as African Americans. But the middle-class, second-generation, Black immigrants attributed their success to their ethnicity and so identified as "West Indian." This process of ethnic self-selection is partially responsible for the misperception that Black immigrants are blanketly more successful than African Americans.

Contemporary scholarship on Black immigrants has had to contend with that politically contentious and hotly contested idea about Black immigrants' success relative to African Americans. Suzanne Model's (2008) *West Indian Immigrants: A Black Success Story?* puts this dilemma front and center. Model argues that the gap between West Indians and African Americans in New York has been overstated. Using statistical modeling primarily from decennial census data, as well as historical and ethnographic methods, Model tests three reigning hypotheses of economic disparity between West Indians and African Americans: selectivity, cultural factors, and employer favoritism. She finds that West Indian immigrants are a positively selected population and that arguments of cultural capital and employer favoritism are inadequate explanations for the slight edge West Indians have over African Americans. She claims that West Indians are an immigrant success story not a Black success story. Meaning that their gains are explained by their immigrant selectivity, but their losses can be attributed to anti-Black discrimination. In other words, Black immigrants are not "overcoming" racism. By comparing these Black immigrants to White immigrants, she finds the former do significantly worse—showing that race, in fact, continues to hamper success.

Twenty years ago, Black immigrants operated as a benchmark for assessing whether anti-Black racism still explains the position of Black Americans in U.S. society. The standing hypothesis was, if Black immigrants could achieve rates of educational, occupational, and economic outcomes that more closely resembled Whites, then anti-Black racism does not explain the outcomes of African Americans, whom share the same racial status as Black immigrants. Economist Thomas Sowell is perhaps the most infamous proponent of using Black immigrant success to argue that there is something endemic to African American culture itself, not institutional racism, that explains their socio-economic position. While Model (2008) and countless waves of research have countered the problematic framing of Black American culture, in this way, (Kelley, 1997; Model, 2008) debate persists about identifying and intervening on "pathological" elements of Black culture (Patterson & Fosse, 2015). Winston James (2002) points to how immigrants, West Indians in particular, have been prominently featured in the polemics on the predicament of African Americans by social scientists. Regarding economist, Thomas Sowell, he writes,

> [he] offered the success of Caribbean immigrants relative to Afro-Americans as proof that Afro-Americans' "culture" (meaning, apparently, collectively held beliefs and values) accounts for their poverty. Racism has not stopped West Indians, he suggests, and it would not stop Afro-Americans if they possessed the cultural ingredients for success: a greater capacity for thrift, sobriety, hard work and deferred gratification (p. 223–224).

Ifatunji (2016) argues that the model minority narrative deployed by Sowell operates as a racial trope that maintains White hegemony by attributing racial stratification to the cultural attributes of racial minority groups instead of social structures (p. 111). For this reason, he claims, iterations of the theory will continue to emerge in periodicals and other academic writing, including the previously discussed segmented assimilation theory (ibid).

4.2 | Historical background

Explaining the disparities between Black immigrants and African Americans dates back to the earliest cited sociological study on Black immigrant communities in the United States, Ira Reid's (1939) *Negro Immigrant*. Like contemporary scholarship, he took the demographic mecca of New York City as his starting point to study Black immigrants. Reid questions their modes of assimilation and accommodation, noting that both U.S. and foreign-born blacks are

"theoretically regarded as biologically unassimilable in the United States' melting pot" (p. 24). Reid categorizes Black immigrants as one of the subgroups that make up "the Negro." While immigrants are forced to modify their culture to conform to some aspects of Black life in the United States, they, in turn, modify the culture of the native Black population (p. 25). By pointing to both sides of the incorporation process, Reid's work exhibits Black multiplicities at play. But the simultaneous process of transforming while being transformed is riddled with conflict between immigrant and native blacks, different Black immigrant groups, and different generations of the same immigrant group (ibid).

Historical and contemporary scholarship often incorporates a cursory nod to Reid's work as a way to show the long history of conflict between Black immigrants and African Americans. However, the field could benefit from attending to the breadth and diversity of conflict that Reid points to because it would require that we press past a singular characterization of antagonisms as the primary feature of Black intraracial relations. Reid's study also addressed the breadth of language diversity (English, Spanish, and French) among Black Caribbean immigrants. But the contemporary era of scholarship, with few exceptions (see Watkins-Owens, 1996), centers on the English-speaking demographic.[1] Contemporary scholarship tends to marginalize the breadth of conflict and the diversity of language among Black immigrants, in favor of attending to the antagonisms between African American and West Indians, and relatedly tends to circumscribe the target population to those that speak English.

The focus on English-speaking immigrants is a methodological move that allows studies to control for language, thus making these immigrants more comparable to African Americans than either Spanish-speaking or French-speaking Black immigrants. By taking this approach scholars were able to challenge claims from political conservatives who argued that Black immigrants, who mirror the racial and linguistic profiles of African Americans, were not being held back by race but instead succeeding because of their culture. But in this move to show the persistence of racism, non-English speaking Black immigrants were often excluded from the conceptualization of Black immigrants. Current scholarship more readily attends to this type of erasure while also responding to shifting Black narratives and assessing variation in social, economic, and political outcomes.

4.3 | Current scholarship

In the 20 years since the publication of *Black Identities*, studies on Black immigrants have grown across disciplines, to include psychology, history, anthropology, political science, and a number of subfields in sociology. I briefly expound upon the latter two to illustrate how current scholarship continues to address themes of disparities that emerged in contemporary studies but in a way that explicitly challenges frameworks that shore up narratives of Black immigrant exceptionalism and ultimately force us to reconsider the way we conceptualize Black immigrants.

Current scholarship on Black immigrants goes one step further than contemporary scholarship did in explicitly pushing against narratives of ethnic exceptionalism on two fronts: first, as a viable strategy for mobility used by immigrants and second, as an interpretive framework to make sense of outcomes. Wallace (2018) for instance critiques exceptionalism as a viable route of escaping White racism:

> Ethnic imaginaries and their associated myths of ethnic exceptionalism are ultimately failed projects. Based on a BlackCrit exegesis, ethnic imaginaries, no matter how expansive or promising, cannot undo Black corporeality. When attached to the Black body, ethnicity fails to fully free its subjects of (police and state) suspicion, scrutiny, and subjugation. This is no secret to Black immigrants and their children. Yet, ethnicity's allure remains; its appeal rests in its conceivable capacity to shield partially or lessen occasionally an otherwise unencumbered White racism. Black ethnic exceptionalism—or, in the case of this study, Black Caribbean exceptionalism—then becomes a curious construction formulated not deliberately for the expansion of anti-Blackness but explicitly as a defense against, or marginal relief from, White racism's yielded pressures (p. 280).

Wallace finds that second generation Black Caribbean youth, who encounter the dehumanizing and oppressive policy of stop-and-frisk in New York, are forced to come to terms with being Black in society. The institution of the carceral state disrupts the possibility that performing class and ethnic scripts, of accents and symbols, will shield them from anti-Black racism.

Despite findings that indicate only the possibility of gaining modest advantages by drawing on ethnic exceptionalism, Ifatunji (2016) argues that we can expect to see continued deployment of the rhetoric of the Black model minority and cultural attributes in popular and academic discourse because it directs attention away from addressing mainstream racism.

> First, the model minority hypothesis fits well within other dominant American narratives (i.e., the "American Dream"). This makes its basic tenets familiar and easily deployed and understood by the public. Second, it directs attention away from public policy reform by focusing on the cultural attributes of racially stigmatized and marginalized groups, leaving "mainstream society" unaccountable. Therefore, the term "model minority" may not always be used, but racial consciousness and contestation will be increasingly *discouraged*, and hard work will be *encouraged*, in response to fiery demands for racial redress. (p.133).

Waters and early scholars noted that while distancing may be a successful strategy for some Black immigrants navigating the institutional racial landscape of work and school, it leaves the structure of racism in place. Current research centers these structures of racism that limit the effectiveness of such strategies. For example, by drawing from critical race theory (CRT) instead of assimilation theories, Wallace (2018) unfetters explanations of Black immigrants' identities and outcomes from narratives of exceptionalism.

Critiquing the exceptionalist framework foregrounds current research that continues to explore the intraracial similarities and disparities between and among Black immigrants, as well as African Americans, in the labor market (see Ifatunji, 2017, 2018; Model, 2018), the housing market (Argeros, 2013), in educational outcomes (Wallace, 2018), health outcomes (Hamilton, 2014), and political patterns (Greer, 2013; Smith, 2014; Thomas, 2018). Ifatunji (2017, 2018) and Model's (2018) recent debate about the selectivity hypothesis reveals the importance of fine tuning our measures of assessing labor market outcomes of West Indian immigrants. Argeros (2013) extends the earlier work on spatial assimilation (Crowder, 1999) of Black immigrants by measuring how nativity status and language impact suburban residence. As discussed earlier, Wallace's work (2018) on the way Black Caribbean school boys manage encounters with police shows that immigrants do not relinquish ethnic identity in the face of racial oppression and thus stands to show the possible range of ways Black immigrants and nonimmigrants respond to Black subjugation.

Fine tuning the empirical measures and theoretical frameworks has also led to reframing the concept of Black immigrants. Whereas early scholarship used English-speaking immigrants from the Caribbean as a proxy for all Black immigrants, current scholarship has found that conceptualization to be insufficient in at least two ways. One being that specific national and regional origins have significant impact on health outcomes (Hamilton, 2014), social boundary formation (Richards, 2014), and political opinions (Greer, 2013). Second, and relatedly, the existing proxy cannot account for the experiences of largest and highly selective demographic of African immigrants, Nigerians (Imoagene, 2017). Taken together, these findings reveal the inability of the contemporary conceptualization Black immigrants to capture Black multiplicities.

5 | DEFINING A BLACK IMMIGRANT

Over the last two decades, social scientists have defined Black immigrants in different ways depending on the parameters of their study. Waters (1999) draws from English-speaking Afro-Caribbean immigrants because they

provide a control group to compare to African Americans. Unfortunately, this means that the study excludes African immigrants, refugees, and linguistically distinct French-speaking and Spanish-speaking descendent immigrants. Christina Greer's (2013) *Black Ethnics* defines Black immigrants as those who fall under the category of non-Hispanic Black; she draws from Afro-Caribbean and African nationalities and compares them to African Americans, in her analysis of Black ethnic political opinions. Wright Austin, Middleton, and Yon (2012) use "African descent" to define Black immigrants in their study on the impact of group consciousness on political participation in Miami; they include Africans, Haitians, Afro-Cubans, and other Afro-Caribbeans in their sample. And there are numerous studies emerging that focus specifically on Black immigrants from countries in Africa (Abdi, 2015; Imoagene, 2017; Showers, 2015). The complexity of conceptualizing this group reflects shifting demographics of the Black population in the United States. It also reflects the ever changing and sometimes contradictory definition of the regional boundaries and countries they migrate from; the distinct patterns of relocation; the different processes of racialization; the politicization of blackness; and the contending grammars of race and ethnic concepts.

5.1 | The case of Black immigrants

The demographic definition of Black immigrants that sociology draws on includes populations who come from countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Anglophone Caribbean, Francophone Caribbean, and increasingly Latin America and the Spanish Caribbean (Shaw-Taylor, 2007); they come to settle either permanently or temporarily[2] in the United States. However, the demographic definition is often circumscribed by other considerations such as language and immigration status before it is operationalized for research. With the exception of refugees, scholars often characterize their pattern of relocation as voluntary because they decided to migrate to the United States through a range of means and motivations. The voluntary characterization stands in contrast to involuntary migrants, of whom African Americans are often presented as the paradigmatic case because they were enslaved and transported against their will during the transatlantic slave trade. The voluntary–involuntary distinction is one framework used to understand how Blacks from a variety of national backgrounds relate to the U.S. racial structure and relate to each other.[3] Candis Watts Smith (2014) shows how Black immigrants from Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean each come from distinct racial landscapes that have different consequences for racial socialization. "Racial socialization – or the process by which people learn the meaning of their race and racial status in a particular society – shapes the way we understand our identity as well as how race might affect social status, culture, and group history" (p. 19). What Blackness means in an African country like Ghana (Pierre, 2013) is different from what Blackness means in South American countries like Mexico (Jones, 2013), Colombia (Paschel, 2013), or Brazil (Loveman, 2014; Monk, 2016), different from what Blackness means in a Caribbean country like Jamaica (Thomas, 2004; Vickerman, 1999) or European countries like France (Fleming, 2017) or England (Bashi Treitler, 2007; Imoagene, 2017). Historian Winston James (1998) reiterates these claims by pointing out how immigrants coming from countries that are majority Black—like those in some parts of Africa and the Caribbean—and where Blacks are regularly in positions of power socializes them differently than African Americans, who are a minority in a country where the power elite are White. Yet, as previously discussed, the implication that such dynamics explain advantageous outcomes of Black immigrants must be tempered by considerations of Black corporeality (Carbado, 2005; Golash-Boza, 2012; Johnson, 2016; Wallace, 2018).

5.2 | Defining Blackness in the case of Black immigrants

Sociology of immigration often relies on an ascriptive definition of Blackness. This means that the subfield derives its scholarly articulation of Blackness from the convergence of a series of immutable phenotypical characteristics associated with African Americans in the United States and applies it to international migrants to define them as Black upon arrival. But we should not misinterpret the process of Black racialization as meaning that immigrants experience either Blackness, race, or anti-Black racism for the first time, either interpersonally or institutionally, upon

reaching the United States. Broader institutional structures of race act upon immigrants before their arrival through forms of U.S. imperialism and European colonialism. Immigrants also encounter forms of interpersonal racism in their country of origin through interactions with institutional actors and encounters with tourists, missionaries, and non-governmental organizations (Boyce Davies, 1994; Kincaid, 1990; Thompson, 2006). For example, the wave of Jamaican immigrants from the 1965 era were born and raised as Black colonial subjects in their island of origin and were subjugated to White supremacist institutions that limited their access to resources for survival such as schools, banks, and land.

Attending to the relationship between colonialism and immigration stands to center processes of racialization rather than assimilation. Colonialism reveals that institutional racism is embedded in both the emigration and immigration process. This connection was made by Black liberation activist and Trinidadian immigrant, Stokely Carmichael, along with political scientist Charles V. Hamilton in their revolutionary book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (1967). They first articulated the theory of institutional racism by making analytical connections between U.S. racism and various forms of colonial oppression. From a political perspective, the Black radical tradition provides rich potential to challenge the structures of anti-Black oppression. Historically, Black political struggles against colonialism were pan-Black projects. In the contemporary moment, we can look at how #blacklivesmatter emerged from the joint activism of Nigerian-American Opal Tometi and African Americans Patrice Cullors and Alicia Garza (Khan-Cullors, Bandele, & Davis, 2018; Ransby, 2018; Taylor, 2016). Yet, segmented assimilation theory misses the way Black immigrants politically organize with African Americans because Black identity is framed as either downward mobility or oppositional identity.

Research on the political lives of Black immigrants continues to develop in a number of directions. While a full review of the breadth of political work being done is beyond the scope of this review, I briefly note three trends. First, in the arena of formal politics, sociologists and political scientists continue to study the impact Black immigrants will have on Black politics, local politics, and national politics (Greer, 2013; Kasinitz, 1992; Rogers, 2006; Smith, 2014; Thomas, 2018; Wright Austin, 2018). Second, and relatedly, historian Violet Showers Johnson (2016) in conversation with sociologist Milton Vickerman (2016) and anthropologist Nancy Foner (2016) address the complexity of intraracial coalition building between Black Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, and African Americans, in the face of anti-Black racial violence. Johnson investigates the tensions between organizers in the high-profile cases of Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant, tortured and sodomized by NYPD; Amadou Diallo, an unarmed West African immigrant from Guinea, gunned down by plainclothes NYPD officers, who fired 41 shots at his back while he stood in the vestibule of his home; and Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian student, beaten to death with a baseball bat by neo-Nazi skinheads in Portland, Oregon (Johnson, 2016, p. 32). And third, transnationalism (Basch, Schiller, & Szanton Blanc, 1994) emerged to explain the connections Black immigrants maintain to their homeland and their emergence as a political constituency for politicians in their country of origin.

5.3 | Generating new inquiry: Beyond denigration of Blackness and the White immigrant analogy

A significant cache of early sociological questions on Black immigrants in the United States relied on comparing how well this group has assimilated into White society relative to the failure of Black Americans (Light, 1972; Sowell, 1979) and the success of White immigrants (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963). Kim (1999) refers to this as relative valorization, the process whereby Blackness is implicitly and explicitly denigrated as a means to valorize Asian Americans as a model minority. The concept itself emerged in 1966, the same year Stokely Carmichael popularized the term "Black Power" (p.119). Kim uses this point of contrast to illustrate how racist polemics position Asian immigrants, as "good minorities" relative to Black Americans as "bad minorities." In a similar vein, the framing of Black immigrants as "Black model minorities"/"good Blacks" in contrast to African Americans as "bad Blacks" (Rogers, 2006, p. 26) speaks to Bashi Treitler's (2015) concern that scholarship which relies on assimilation theories risk shoring up conservative ideological implications stemming from Sowell's (1979) conclusion about

immigrant success. When scholarship follows this bent of research questions, it reifies Black immigrants as exceptional. This systematic form of inquiry, Lewis Gordon (2007) notes, is premised upon White supremacy as the basis of human normality and thus results in notions of deviation that structure Black people in a derivative relationship with Whites (p. 75).

The White immigrant analogy exemplifies one of the ways Blacks are theorized as derivative to Whites. Traditionally, sociologists draw on the analogy of White European assimilation to assess assimilation trajectories of today's immigrants of color. This is because historians and social scientists have long operated on the premise that Southern and Eastern Europeans were non-White and then subsequently became White through processes of assimilation and shifting racial boundaries (Roediger, 1991). This historical framework has implications for contemporary articulations of racial boundary formation in sociology. For instance, early editions of Portes and Rumbaut (1996) *Immigrant America* are among the many influential texts that have borrowed this historical framework to predict the incorporation trajectories of contemporary non-White immigrants. While acknowledging the discrimination that European immigrants endured and the range of the Whiteness category to incorporate "racially distinct whites" (Foner, 2005), sociologists and historians continue to challenge the suitability of the analogy (see McMahon, 2015) and provide alternative racial historiographies (see Parham, 2017).

Fox and Guglielmo (2012) have called into question the suitability of the White immigrant analogy for predicting the United States' shifting color lines, citing the virtually uncontested nature of Southern and Eastern Europeans' Whiteness in U.S. history, relative to Blacks and Mexicans (p. 331). In their systematic comparison of Blacks, Mexicans, and Southern and Eastern Europeans (SEEs) during the first half of the 20th century, they find that, "no boundary separated SEEs from whites; SEEs were not widely recognized as nonwhite, nor was such a boundary institutionalized. In fact, where white was a meaningful category, SEEs were virtually always included within it" (ibid). Instead they propose an alternative framework that interrogates the complex relationship between Mexican Americans and Whiteness, who were sometimes included and sometimes excluded from the legal and social category of White. In *Mexican Americans and the Question of Race*, Julie Dowling (2014) also finds that Mexican Americans have a complex relationship to Whiteness and one that is distinct from European immigrants. As mentioned earlier, Parham (2017) also notes the limits of using the experience of European immigrants as a point of comparison in assessing the experience of contemporary immigrants of color (p. 3). In *American Routes: Racial Palimpsests and the Transformation of Race*, she draws from the historiographies of immigrants of color from St. Domingue to Louisiana in the 19th century. She illustrates how Black and Brown immigrants negotiated both Anglo and Creole racial systems, which she conceptualizes as racial palimpsests.[4] By centering multiple racial systems in her analysis, Parham moves beyond the White immigrant analogy, centers Black multiplicities, and provides a more relevant analytical lens for understanding current racialized migration experiences.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article reviewed how the sociology of immigration approaches the study of Black immigrants. It explicitly pointed to the ways that assimilation theories reify parochial and monolithic notions of Blackness and suggests that the field might counter these narratives by drawing from theories of Black multiplicities. Because Black multiplicities is an analytical framework that explores the complexities of Blackness, it stands in contrast to monolithic constructions of Blackness. Operationalizing Black multiplicities, in the sociology of immigration, requires drawing from theories of racialization rather than theories of assimilation. I reviewed how monolithic articulations of Blackness emerge in segmented, classic, canonical, and neoclassical theories of assimilation. I then charted the way contemporary, historical, and current studies on Black immigrants intersect, contend with, and depart from those theories of assimilation. Finally, I discussed how the concept of Black immigrant outgrew its heuristic utility and addressed the way new

research agendas, and shifting demographics of the population (Anderson, 2015, 2017) requires the field to reconceptualize the meaning by drawing on Black multiplicities.

ENDNOTES

[1] Scholars justify this approach by claiming that English-speaking Black immigrants share a language with African Americans and thus provide a more accurate comparison group than either French- or Spanish-speaking Black immigrants, such as Haitians and Dominicans.

[2] The scholarship on transnationalism has highlighted the process of immigration as a dynamic one that consists of movement between the sending and receiving nations over the life course and through generations; it also pushed aside assumptions that immigration is a one-way process.

[3] Ogbu draws distinctions between minorities, who are voluntary immigrants and involuntary nonimmigrants and notes that refugees, undocumented migrants, guest workers, and binationals fall into neither category. "Voluntary (immigrant) minorities are those who have more or less willingly moved to the United States because they expect better opportunities (better jobs, more political, or religious freedom) than they had in their homelands or places of origin. The people in this category may be different from the majority in race and ethnicity or in religion or language. The important distinguishing features are that (a) the people in this category voluntarily chose to move to U.S. society in the hope of a better future, and (b) they do not interpret their presence in the United States as forced upon them by the U.S. government or by White Americans" (Ogbu & Simons, 1998, p. 164).

[4] A palimpsest is created when a new layer of writing or painting is placed on top of a preexisting layer. A racial palimpsest occurs when a preexisting racial system is almost fully eclipsed by a new racial system that comes into place as a population that lives according to a different racial logic begins to numerically or administratively dominate a region (p. 2).

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