

## **Comments on “Black like us? The occupational integration of Black immigrants”**

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### **Introduction**

This commentary focuses on “Black like us? The occupational integration of Black immigrants” by Mwangi wa Githinji and Patrick L. Mason makes an important contribution to the growing body of research in the field of Stratification Economics (SE). As the the first detailed comparison of occupational mobility between native-born and immigrant Blacks from various countries of origin the study provides new evidence regarding the inner workings and implications of racialized stratification in labor markets. The explicit focus on interplay between group identity and economic outcomes clearly identifies the investigation as a contribution to the SE body of knowledge. In addition, the analysis is especially relevant at a time when policy and public debates are raging regarding the impact of immigration on employment outcomes of domestic workers.

The literature exploring the extent to which immigrants can be employed as lower cost substitutes for domestic Black workers has generated conflicting conclusions. As an example, Borjas, Grogger, and Hanson (2010) asserted that immigration significantly reduced the wages of Black workers with low levels of education and increased involvement in criminal activities. Mason (2014) contested these findings and concluded “for African Americans as a whole, immigration may have little effect on mean wages and probability of employment.” However, Mason (2023, 282) acknowledged that “there is some evidence that immigration may have had an adverse impact on the labor market outcomes of African Americans belonging to low education-experience groups.” However, Mason also observes that “Some Black immigrants, for example, Creole- and French-speaking Haitian immigrants, along with Spanish-speaking

Caribbean immigrants, have less desirable labor market outcomes than native-born African Americans due to lower labor market characteristics, such as years of education, difficulties reading, writing, understanding, or speaking English" (Mason 2023, 282). The remainder of this exploration consists of a summary, commentary, and suggestions for further research.

## **Summary**

The authors state that "Black like us?" examines "the extent to which Black immigrants in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries integrate into the Black community measured by the degree of Black Immigrant and Native nonimmigrant Black occupational integration." To the extent that domestic Blacks and Black immigrants have different occupational distributions and occupational trajectories, it is reasonable to expect less inter-group labor market competition. Conversely, similar occupational distributions and occupational trajectories could signal heightened labor market competition. Presumably lesser inter-group labor competition increases the likelihood of identity convergence. However, it is useful to pose the question "to what extent can (a) meaningful identity convergence to be generated without occupational convergence, or (b) substantial identity divergence persist when occupational convergence increases?"

Concerns regarding trends in identity convergence or divergence are motivated, in part, by increases in migration from countries with different experiences with racial stratification than those of domestic Blacks. The authors suggest that this shift the potential to alter "Black identity as we know it" and predict that the "degree and speed of change will depend on the extent to which the new immigrants are integrated into the existing Black community and identity." The authors hypothesize that "beyond national origin and language, that the degree of integration will be driven by wealth and class, education, economic conditions of the home country and the possibility of return, ease of movement between the home country and the USA, in addition to

the socioeconomic conditions in the USA.” They opine that “The extent to which integration is possible will determine whether we continue to have a relatively stable Black identity in the country or whether we are likely to see the rise of multiple Black identities characterized by different political visions and economic outcomes.” Notably, the discussion of these issues in the study primarily highlights the barriers to cultivating a shared Black identity. This issue is addressed in subsequent comments.

The data in Table 1 document the changes size and composition of 21<sup>st</sup> century Black immigration referenced by the authors. In general the data show a much slower growth of immigrants from the western hemisphere than African countries.

Table 1: Top Birthplaces of Black Immigrants in the US 2000 and 2019

	2000	2019	2019 - 2010	Pct. Change
Jamaica	530,000	760,000	230,000	43.9
Haiti	410,000	700,000	290,000	70.7
Nigeria	130,000	390,000	260,000	200.0
Ethiopia	70,000	260,000	190,000	185.7
Dominican Republic	80,000	210,000	130,000	162.5
Ghana	70,000	190,000	120,000	171.4
Trinidad and Tobago	160,000	170,000	10,000	6.3
Kenya	30,000	130,000	100,000	333.3
Guyana	110,000	120,000	10,000	9.1
Somalia	40,000	110,000	70,000	175.0

Source:

Pew Research Center analysis of Census Data, “Key Findings About Black Immigrants in the U.S.” <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/01/27/key-findings-about-black-immigrants-in-the-u-s/>. (January 27, 2022).

Key constructs undergirding the investigation include: (a) immigration advantage, and (b) immigrant selectivity. Partially as an attempt to control for the possibility that “Immigrants from countries from which it is difficult to emigrate from are likely to have higher skills, social networks, and capital that may not be easily controlled” the authors constructed an “Index of Revealed Advantage in Migration.” The index reflects the assumption that if “migration was equally easy and desirable from every country then the proportion of immigrants from any country to the USA would be the same as the proportion of that country’s population in global

population.” This assumption leads to the conclusion that “the difference between the proportion of a country’s emigrants to a receiving country and its share in global population is an indicator of how selective emigration is from the sending country to the receiving country.” The metric

$\frac{Mi}{M_{usa}} - \frac{Pi}{P_w}$  is deployed to reflect selectivity with  $M_i$  representing the immigrant population from country  $i$ ,  $P_i$  denoting the population of country  $i$ , and  $M_{usa}$  measuring the population of immigrants in the USA, and  $P_w$  representing the world population. As the authors explain, “An index of less than zero means immigration from the country is highly selective and the country sends fewer emigrants to the USA than its proportion of the population of the world, [whereas] An index larger than zero means a country sends more than its fair share of emigrants to the USA and therefore other things being the same emigration to the USA is relatively easier.”

As the authors explain, “Black immigrants are not randomly selected populations from African, Caribbean, and other countries.” Three hypotheses are introduced to account for this phenomenon. The first distinguishes between hyper- and hypo-selected immigrants with Hyper-selected immigrants being better educated and better resourced relative to average member of country of origin and relative to the average member of host country. In contrast, “Hypo-selected immigrants are less educated and less resourced relative to average member of country of origin and relative to the average member of host country.”

The second hypothesis relates to the relationship between socioeconomic status in country of origin and in the receiving country. The concept of “lateral mobility” is foregrounded that predicts that “black immigrants of middle or higher socioeconomic status in their country of origin should achieve the same relative status in the USA.” As a consequence, “some black immigrants are more likely to obtain higher socioeconomic status than native-born African-Americans, who are disproportionately poor and of lower socioeconomic status.” The authors

indicate that “To the extent that immigrants re-establish their status position in the U.S. labor market, we observe immigrant assimilation with white male workers within 10–15 years.

Further, second generation black immigrants within each market segment should have wage parity with native-born Non-Hispanic white workers.”

The third hypothesis introduces the concept of “imported stratification” that predicts that “social and economic stratification structures in the country of origin might be imported and sustained by immigrant groups in the destination country.” The authors use the experiences of Ethiopian and Eritrean immigrants to explain this phenomenon.

The empirical analysis uses data from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC) to “estimate the degree to which these characteristics and socio-economic conditions predict occupation segregation between 3<sup>rd</sup> and higher generation African-Americans (“native-born Blacks”) and 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation African-Americans (“Black Immigrants”) as well [as] segregation between native-born Non-Hispanic white-only (“Core white”) Americans.”

The first phase of the analysis used ordered logit regression to examine mobility from lower status to higher status occupations ranked by the mean white male wage of each occupation. The regression that included all workers generated results indicating that a 1-point increase in ease of immigration increased the likelihood of a Black male immigrant moving to a higher wage white male occupation by 56 percent relative to white men, but the coefficient was not significant in the regression with domestic African Americans constituted the reference group. Eleven of the twelve significant coefficients for the various racial/ethnic groupings are less than 1, (ranging from .517 for Core Blacks to .881 for Caribbean Spanish) indicating a lower probability of moving to a higher status occupation than white males. In the African American

regression eight of the twelve significant coefficients are greater than 1 (ranging from 1.121 for Native Black Hispanics to 1.899 for second generation Africans), indicating a greater probability of moving to a higher occupation than domestic Blacks. These patterns are similar for the regressions that exclude the Immigration Advantage variable.

The second phase deployed multinomial logit regression to examine mobility across 22 major occupations with production workers serving as the comparative occupation. The occupations were grouped into three categories (high, medium, and low) based on the mean wage of white males. Separate regressions were estimated for men and women. The authors conclude that “Relative migration advantage has less influence on intra-racial differences in occupational mobility than it does on inter-racial differences in occupational mobility, especially among the highest paid occupations.” They report that “Relative migration advantage is statistically significant in 18 of the 21 equations examining inter-racial differences in occupational mobility.” When the sample was restricted to African American men, the authors found that the “revealed advantage in migration index is statistically significant for just 9 occupations.” The authors conclude that “Mostly, our results are consistent with the lateral mobility hypothesis, where the second generation reproduces the relative class position a group would have had in their country of origin.”

### **Commentary**

The examination of the experiences of Black immigrants adjusting to life in the United States by Meyer et al. (2021) demonstrates how “systemic discrimination and prejudice constitute racialized violence and how exposure to trauma and stress over a lifetime impacts Black immigrants.” In the current era Black immigrant youth are especially at risk of experiencing overtly racist encounters like those experienced by African American males. As an

example, Wallace (2018) asserts that second generation Black Caribbean youth encounters with “the dehumanizing and oppressive policy of stop-and-frisk in New York” force youth “to terms with being Black in society [as t]he 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.” It is important to keep this broader perspective in mind even as specific dimensions of that experience, e.g. labor market outcomes, are examined.

In general, the results reported in “Black like us?” are consistent with patterns observed during earlier periods. As an example, Hyckak and Stewart (1984) examined earnings variation among male immigrants using data from the 1970 Census. In general, the results of this investigation suggest (a) that significant differentials in earnings profiles exist across country of origin and race; (b) that economic conditions at time of entry affect subsequent earnings profiles; and (c) that significant differences exist in the returns to pre- and post-migration human capital investments.

A regression model of earnings determinants was estimated to examine the impacts of country/region of origin, race, and conditions at the time of entry on earnings profiles with immigrants from the UK serving as the control group. Significant variations in earnings profiles were found across areas of origin. Black immigrants were found to have depressed earnings profiles, with differentials relative to non-black immigrants increasing over time. Evidence was uncovered suggesting that economic conditions at the time of entry to the United States have a small but non-negligible effect on the earnings profiles of immigrants.

The authors found that immigrants from non-western and/or underdeveloped areas increase their earnings capacity relative to immigrants from the United Kingdom the longer they remain in the United States as gradual erosion of qualitative human capital differences occurs.

They found no statistically significant difference in the returns to pre- and post-immigration schooling. They ascribed this finding to the transferability of across labor markets. Work experience prior to migration was found to have a much smaller marginal effect on earnings than did experience gained in the United States. The authors interpreted this result to reflect the fact that work experience contains a greater degree of specific skills training that it is likely to transfer easily with migration. The remainder of this commentary focuses on three issues: (1) Identity Choices; (2) Timing of Entry; and (3) Occupational Access and Choice.

### **Identity Choices**

Differences in the experiences of Caribbean and African immigrants. As Francis (2022) explains, the first large-scale Caribbean migration consisted of 250,000 mostly male laborers many of whom settled in the US after working on construction of the Panama Canal between 1881 and 1915. Subsequently, many of these Black Caribbean migrants sought jobs in the same northern factories as Black American migrants from the southern US. Caribbean migration accelerated during World War II and continued into the post-World War II period. Following passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 immigration from the Caribbean grew dramatically and by 2001, an estimated 2.9 million Caribbean immigrants were residing in the US, many living in relatively self-contained communities in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Miami, and Los Angeles.

Model (2008) reports that although Caribbean immigrants have been touted as a success story because their economic outcomes exceed those of African Americans, some research indicates that this success is due to immigrants' pre-immigration socio-economic characteristics rather than ascribed characteristics such as a strong work ethic. Tesfai (2019) reports that in contrast to African immigrants, Caribbean immigrants still face high racial and socioeconomic

segregation and Model (2008) reports 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. However, she also found that middle-class, second-generation, Black immigrants attributed their success to their ethnicity and so identified as “West Indian.” opportunities for second, third, and subsequent generations to experience upward mobility. Such communities can also facilitate chain migration by providing support for new cohorts to settle with minimal difficulties.

A study by Emeka (2019) focuses on Nigerian-Americans born between 1976 and 1985 and he found that the number of individuals self-classifying as “Nigerian” shrunk by more than 25 per cent between 2000 and 2014, but no more than 2.2 per cent of the Nigerian second generation identified “American” or “United States” as their primary ancestry or ethnic origin. Twenty-five per cent of the Nigerian second generation identified “Afro-American” or “African-American” as their only ancestry or ethnic origin. At the same time, 75 percent remained identified “Nigerian” as their primary ancestry or ethnic origin. Emeka (2019) suggests “This fact may speak to the strength of affective ties between members of the Nigerian second generation and the families and communities from which they hale, but it may also reflect the protective effects Nigerian identities have when the alternative is to be seen as “just black” in a society that continues to exclude black people.” Consistent with this interpretation, Emeka (2019) that “US-born Nigerian children residing in poor families with parents who have not completed high school or college degrees are significantly more likely to “drop out” of the Nigerian group in favour of “African American” or “just black” identities.”

The authors may want to reconsider their interpretation of Oromo and Ethiopian identity dynamics. Guluma (2023) found that Oromo immigrants “draw a sharp distinction between

Oromo and Ethiopian as both separate national and ethnic identities” and “embrace their Black identity in part by relying on narratives of Blackness rooted in a shared history of anti-Black oppression. Gulumah concludes that “these findings demonstrate how Black immigrants’ identity can inform and be informed by notions of Blackness in both the United States and homeland contexts, and the importance of attending to subnational ethnic diversity in studies of immigration.”

### **Timing of Entry**

Although the authors did not report results for any of the control variables inclusion of discussion of the coefficients of the year of entry controls could have been informative. discrimination. Reference is made of the Hart Celler Act of 1965 and the Immigration Act of 1990 it is not clear how these laws were reflected in the construction of the time of entry dummy variables. In contrast, Stewart and Hyckak (1979) included four dummy variables in the analysis of the family income and poverty status of immigrants, each reflecting a particular immigration regime: 1924-1939; 1939-1952; 1952-1964; and 1965-1970. As would be expected the longest longer tenured residents (1924-1939) had higher incomes and the shortest tenured residents had lower incomes. However, the signs of the coefficients associated with the two intermediate periods were not significant. The authors’ time of entry controls encompass the period 1948 – 1970 so a comparison of measured impacts would have been feasible.

Immigrants who came to the US to escape political turmoil in their country of origin have experienced more difficulties in navigating US society than those whose primary motivation is improved economic opportunities. For example, immigration from Liberia has been catalyzed by two civil wars, the first spanning 1998 -1997 and the second from 1999 – 2003). Ludwig (2019) reports that because of these conflicts, “many Liberian parents never completed their formal

education and thus are illiterate, forcing them to work as home health aides.” This trajectory has created difficulties for their children including taunts associated with their status as “refugees.” Consequently, many have chosen “to distance themselves from their African heritage” and adopt an identity profile that also embodies efforts to “escape discrimination from African Americans in their neighborhoods.” However, they remain constrained by “externally-imposed anti-blackness social norms when venturing outside their neighborhoods.”

The importance of incorporating variables identifying specific “immigration regimes” in future studies examining the issues explored in “Black like Us” is underscored by current policies that are dismantling the previous immigration regime. In his second administration, President Donald J. Trump has operationalized campaign promise to aggressively pursue removal of noncitizens including pressuring states and localities to cooperate in immigration enforcement (New York City Bar Association 2025). Somali and Haitian immigrants are among the groups targeted aggressively by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In addition, recent actions have imposed significant immigration restrictions targeting nationals from numerous countries. Recent actions have limited immigration from 19 nations deemed "high-risk," including Somalia, Sudan Burundi, Cuba Sierra Leone, and Togo.

### **Occupational Access and Choice**

There are several unexamined issues embedded in the authors’ measure of immigrant selectivity that warrant exploration. For example, what are the actions undertaken by immigrants to (a) obtain initial employment and (b) pursue more desirable positions? A related question is what resources are available to immigrants to overcome obstacles to initial employment and occupational mobility? These questions relate directly to the discussion in Stewart and Hyklak

(1984) regarding pre- and post-migration human capital and social capital available to new immigrants.

The previous discussion of the history of Caribbean immigration describes how enclaves provide entry points for new immigrants to settle and explore employment options. Identification of employment opportunities is facilitated by leads from previous immigrant cohorts. In addition, some immigrants may obtain initial temporary employment in small business enterprises located within the enclave while seeking better paying external options. Initially, the search for external employment options is likely to focus on occupations dominated by White workers based on information that such jobs offer relatively higher pay than those where domestic Blacks are overrepresented. This search strategy may reflect immigrants. Subsequent experience as a victim of anti-Black employment discrimination may lead immigrants to alter job search strategies

Initially, immigrants with high levels of pre-migration human capital who held high status in their country of origin may initially face post-migration barriers to acquiring positions. These barriers include occupational licensing requirements and reluctance to accept the validity of credentials obtained in the country of origin due to concerns regarding the quality of human capital and/or racial discrimination. Some of these immigrants may choose to work in a lower-status occupations in the same sector. Acceptable performance may lead some employers to reassess immigrants' pre-migration human quality and moderate discriminatory behavior and provide opportunities for entry into higher status positions. However, in some cases, e.g. legal and health care occupations, immigrants may be forced to re-credentialize, i.e. obtain new certifications that replicate those obtained in county of origin to gain access to post-migration positions comparable to those held in the country of origin.

Immigrants' experiences regarding occupational entry and occupational mobility in various potential destinations may be shared with individuals in the country-of origin who are exploring immigration options. This information becomes one component of the decision process whereby immigrants choose both destination country and locale within the chosen destination.

## **Conclusion**

Mwangi wa Githinji and Patrick L. Mason are to be congratulated for producing this pathbreaking analysis of an especially important topic within Stratification Economics. The authors note that this is an exploratory study that constitutes the first in anticipated series of investigations. A parallel analysis focusing on the experiences of female immigrants is the logical next step in this research program. The foundation for this extrapolation is embedded in the current study with the inclusion of regressions examining the experiences of female immigrants in Tables 7b-7u.

It is important to pay as much attention to factors contributing to identity convergence as well to those catalyzing identity divergence. Factors contributing to the possibility of Black identity convergence include: (1) intermarriage among members of different Black communities; (2) collaboration in combatting domestic and international institutional racism, and (3) shared patterns of popular culture consumption, especially among youth (Stewart 2024).

Batson et al. (2006) report that "West Indians have the lowest percentage of intermarriage with Whites, but have the highest rate of intermarriage with African Americans [and] Africans also have comparatively high levels of marriage with African Americans (compared to percentages with Whites)." A more recent study by Model (2020) confirms that a "propensity of black ethnics to assimilate into the African American mainstream."

Medford (2019) offers the important reminder that many immigrants are not experiencing “either Blackness, race, or anti-Black racism for the first time, either interpersonally or institutionally, upon reaching the United States.” Elaborating, she insists, “Broader institutional structures of race act upon immigrants before their arrival through forms of U.S. imperialism and European colonialism [and] Immigrants also encounter forms of interpersonal racism in their country of origin through interactions with institutional actors and encounters with tourists, missionaries, and nongovernmental organizations.”

Sall (2020) suggests that “shedding light on the cultural exchange processes among urban West African immigrant youth and their peers of colour . . . has implications for improving intraracial relations.” As Sall (2020) explains, “Teachers, youth workers, and others interested in improving relationships between African and Black American youth in particular should focus on programming that centre on ethnic cultural elements around which there has been positive exchange such as food and fashion.”

Future research using the techniques deployed in Black like us? could be usefully complemented by case studies of labor market dynamics in specific immigrant communities. Such research could generate important information regarding the extent to of variation in efficacy of community networks as employment mediators.

Additional insights regarding the complex of forces associated with the authors’ index of revealed advantage could be generated by in-depth sector and occupation specific studies. The analysis by Clark et al. (2006) of the global market for healthcare professionals could be instructive. During the period of time covered by that study the principal destination of migrating healthcare workers from Africa and the Caribbean was the UK, with relatively few relocating to the US. However, of the 2.8 million US immigrant healthcare workers in 2021, of

Caribbean and African immigrants accounted for 16 and 13 percent, respectively. Stratification is evidenced by the fact that 59 percent of Caribbean workers and 50 percent of African workers were employed in health-care support occupations as opposed to more prestigious occupations.

Incorporating these suggestions into their evolving research may enable Mwangi wa Gĩthĩnji and Patrick L. Mason to come closer to conceptualizing how identity choices can interact with occupational mobility and propose interventions that reduce stratification and shift the immigration narrative from “Black like us?” to “Black Like Us!”

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