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# Panoply: Haitian and Haitian- American Youth Crafting Identities in U.S. Schools

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**Fabienne Doucet**

## **Introduction**

In the United States, where race is a powerful factor for social stratification (Appiah & Gutmann, 1998; Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1990a; Omni & Winant, 1986), foreign-born Blacks find themselves battling the demoralizing impacts of discrimination, racism, and xenophobia on a daily basis. In the school context, racist assumptions have been shown to predispose teachers to have lower expectations of immigrant students and other students of color, to view them more often as behavioral problems, and to assume that their parents do not value education (Doucet, 2008, 2011b; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). At the same time, the powerful influence of race results in Black immigrants becoming “invisible,” in the sense that their individual nationalities, ethnic affiliations, and cultural traditions often are unrecognized or unknown. It is especially important for the well-being of children facing these challenges that their distinct experiences, resources, and vulnerabilities be addressed in the experiences and opportunities made available to them in school. This article focuses on the experiences of Haitian immigrant youth in U.S. schools, specifically addressing the various factors that shape identity formation within this group. The



### **Swaying the Haitian Way**

*High school students Belinda Valcourt (foreground) and Nora Gray perform a traditional Haitian dance at Cambridge Rindge & Latin School in 2006. Culture is an anchor for many students of Haitian descent living in the Boston area as they negotiate the identity issues that accompany adolescence. Photo by Kris Snibbe, Harvard staff photographer. Reprinted by permission.*

article draws from a study I conducted in Greater Boston with 1.5-generation (Haiti-born) and second-generation (U.S.-born) Haitian youth and their families between 2000 and 2002 (Doucet, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Doucet & Suárez-Orozco, 2006). A qualitative investigation, the Boston study was a longitudinal ethnography using participant observation and multiple-structured interviews with students and parents to understand the adaptation of 1.5- and second-generation youth to U.S. schools.

### **Profile and Brief History of Haitians in the United States**

There are over 900,000 persons of Haitian ancestry living in the United States, according to the 2012 American Community Survey (ACS)<sup>1</sup> (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). Of these, approximately 265,000 are 18 and under, representing a significant portion of the overall population of Haitians in the country. Furthermore, children and youth of Haitian ancestry enrolled in school (those above the age of 3) comprise 35 percent of persons reporting Haitian ancestry (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2012). Among Black immigrants, Haitians in particular have been consistently stigmatized and discriminated against by the U.S. government (Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1990a). Indeed, race, ethnicity, and immigration together have created a daunting set of obstacles for Haitian youth as they make sense of their place in the social landscape (Zéphir, 2001). Haitians also are represented disproportionately among the working class and poor in the United States, and Zéphir (2001) clearly articulates the impact of socioeconomic status on the development of ethnic identity.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Doucet & Suárez-Orozco, 2006), the history of the migration of Haitians to the United States serves as an important backdrop to the story of how Haitian youth craft identities in their new home. Historical records show that Haitians fought in the American Revolutionary War (specifically in 1779) (Zéphir, 2004); that during the early 1770s, the first settler of present-day Chicago was the half-Haitian, half-French Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable (Zéphir, 2004); that during Haiti's own revolutionary period (1791–1804), many Haitians fled to New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Norfolk, Savannah, Charleston, and New Orleans (Laguerre, 1998); that Haitians served as U.S. congressmen during the late nineteenth century (Laguerre, 1998); and that the well-known *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, which resulted in the “separate

but equal” ruling, was presented by a group of mostly Haitian Americans in New Orleans (Laguerre, 1998). But according to Laguerre (1984), the first sizable group of Haitians arrived in the United States (settling mostly in Harlem) during the 1920s<sup>2</sup>, ironically to escape the violence and cruelty of the first U.S. occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934 (see also Zéphir, 2004). In the later 20th century, Haitian migration has been generally characterized as marked by two major waves. The first wave, triggered by the dictatorial presidency of François Duvalier, began in the 1950s and represented the mass exodus of upper-class, professional, and educated individuals and families to the United States, Europe, Canada, and Africa (Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1990b; Mintz, 1974; Stepick & Portes, 1986). These families established themselves in their new countries of origin, and many were able to find employment in the occupational sectors for which they were educated or trained (Buchanan, 1983; Woldemikael, 1989). In the United States, these families settled primarily in New York and Boston, with a smaller group opting for the Chicago area.

The late 1970s and early 1980s marked the beginning of the second wave. These more recent émigrés were more impoverished than their counterparts who migrated during the first wave (Stepick & Portes, 1986). Political upheavals in Haiti in the mid-1980s engendered conditions of traumatic experiences (Doucet & Désir, 2003, April) and interrupted schooling for children, and conditions for living in Haiti became unbearable for many impoverished families who saw the United States as a land of opportunity. The arrival of these new Haitians of lower social status was disturbing to many of the “old” immigrant families who perceived this new group as more vulgar, less educated, and as painting a negative image of Haitians in the eyes of Americans (Buchanan, 1983). The bulk of the second wave of Haitian immigrants has settled in Florida, Miami in particular. In the past two decades, Chicago and Washington, D.C., and their surroundings also have emerged as important hubs for Haitians (Zéphir, 2004).

Though proportionately not large enough to be considered a “wave” of immigration, another nonetheless significant historical moment in Haitian migration followed the devastating earthquake of January 2010 in Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince, and its surrounding areas. Close to 1,000 children who survived the earthquake enrolled in the Miami- and Fort

Lauderdale–area public schools (Associated Press, 2010). Similarly, in the New York City public schools, estimates of Haitian students enrolling as a result of displacement ranged from several hundred to 1,000 (A. Infante, personal communication, June 28, 2010); and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2011) reported an influx of more than 700 displaced Haitian students into the Greater Boston public schools. These numbers do not capture the children in these cities who enrolled in private schools, or those who migrated to other areas, but they provide some insight into the exogenous shock this large displacement imposed on children, families, and their new schools and communities.

### **Cultural Context of Haitians in the United States**

Understanding the formation of Haitian immigrant youth identity in the United States also necessitates at least a broad overview of issues with which Haitians grapple as they try to both solidify an ethnic identity and carve a space in the “Black” communities of the United States.

*The Context of Reception.* In a chapter titled “Shifting Identities and Intergenerational Conflict: Growing Up Haitian in Miami,” Alex Stepick and his colleagues (2001) present a theoretical framework for understanding a paradox found among Haitian immigrant youth. The contradiction? How can students who have high educational aspirations, and who work so hard in school, have among the lowest outcomes academically speaking? The contrast of lofty aspirations with poor outcomes is not uncommon among immigrant populations. As Stepick et al. explain, however, even other immigrant children outperform Haitian students. The Haitian case is unique, they argue, first and foremost because of the negative context of reception that Haitians in South Florida face. The context of reception is defined as the combination of government policies, local labor market conditions, and local social relationships affecting an immigrant group (Portes & Borocz, 1989). In the words of Stepick et al., “During the 1970s and 1980s, no other immigrant group suffered more U.S. government prejudice and discrimination than Haitians” (pp. 236–237). Teamed with discrimination in the labor market due to the tuberculosis and AIDS scares (also propagated by the U.S. government), and with social relationships with White Americans, African Americans, and Latinos generally marked by racism and/or

stigmatization, the context of reception for Haitian immigrants in South Florida (and in the U.S. imagination in general) is indeed toxic. More recent research suggests there may be some shifts in Haitians' perceptions of perceived discrimination. In a study of the racial identities of Black immigrants, Benson (2006) found that Haitians were more likely than other Black immigrants to perceive discrimination against Blacks in the housing market. They were, however, less likely than other Black immigrants and native Blacks to perceive discrimination in the labor market. The author asserted that Haitians encounter more success in the labor market than do other Black immigrants, accounting for this finding. On the other hand, notions of Haiti as a wretched and desperate nation populated by wretched and desperate people have become more pronounced following the 2010 earthquake, as media reports never failed to signal that this catastrophe had occurred in "the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere."

Stepick et al. (2001) also point to the human capital of parents—that is, their educational and occupational status. Children whose parents have not been educated in their home countries have difficulty helping their children succeed in the United States (Fulgini, 1997), and it is the case that a substantial portion of Haitian immigrants to South Florida are quite poor and not highly educated. Stepick et al. then argue that the combination of the negative context of reception and low parental human capital lead to cultural dissonance (whereby students become alienated from their parents and the culture these parents represent), low self-esteem, and depression, which then lead to low academic achievement. This model contributes greatly to our understanding of some of the distinct challenges facing Haitian immigrants, articulating the way in which the racism and prejudice Haitians encounter makes it difficult for children to find the resources they need in their parents, schools, and communities.

*Language and Class Politics.* Numerous Haitian scholars have documented the jagged landscape where Haitian Kreyòl and French meet (DeGraff, 2009; Dejean, 1983; Schieffelin & Doucet, 1994; Zéphir, 2010a). The term *diglossia* is used to describe linguistic communities where two closely related languages are spoken by members of the community, with one of the languages holding a high status and the other a lower status. Though initially Haiti was characterized as a diglossic

society by linguists and anthropologists, the work of such important Haitian linguists as Yves Dejean (1983, 1993) has argued convincingly that diglossia incorrectly describes Haiti's linguistic situation, for unlike in true diglossic settings, only a small minority of Haitians speak French, as opposed to French and Kreyòl being spoken by roughly all members of the society, as implied by the diglossic label.<sup>3</sup> Zéphir (2010b) cited Caribbeanist Ulrich Fleischmann's (1984) characterization of Haiti as embodying a *fantasy* of diglossia, wherein the illusion of a fully bilingual society is driven by aspirations to achieve full competence in French dating back to the period of enslavement. Dejean (1993), however, has taken serious exception to this depiction, which, as he sees it, conjures an image of Haitians existing in a state of linguistic longing that does not accurately reflect the reality of most monolingual Haitians. For Dejean, the language question in Haiti is *not* a question for the more than 95 percent of Haitians who speak Kreyòl exclusively. Rather, explains Dejean, it is members of the tiny ruling elite and the small circles of bilingual bourgeois and petty bourgeois who mire themselves in debates and projects defending the place of French in Haitian society.

Once Haitians migrate to the United States, language functions to signal distinction from African Americans (Waters, 1999; Zéphir, 2001). Particularly for the first wave of educated, elite or middle-class migrants, being Haitian was a source of pride that distinguished them from African Americans, whose marginalized and oppressed status made them an undesirable reference group (Woldemikael, 1989). These Haitians enjoyed the prestige associated with being speakers of French, a language that invokes images of sophistication and refinement, and relished in being nicknamed "Frenchies" (Woldemikael, 1989; Zéphir, 1995). By contrast, representations in the media of the second wave of Haitian migrants shifted Haitian identity from a source of pride to a source of shame (Buchanan, 1983; Stepick & Portes, 1986).

Interestingly, in post-migration Haitian enclaves and communities (writ large), language also continues to perform functions of signaling social status, education, wealth, legitimacy, and authority among Haitians (Doucet, 2011c; Woldemikael, 1989; Zéphir, 2001, 2004, 2010a). While in Haiti material wealth was one way for the Haitian upper class to create distance between themselves and the "masses," the American

economic structure is such that a larger percentage of the population can amass the “material symbols of high status, such as cars, televisions, stereo sets, expensive furniture, etc.” (Buchanan, 1983: 14). In response, social markers such as the knowledge of French, a well-known family name, proper upbringing, and good manners take on the functional purpose of determining status among Haitians, even if this differentiation cannot be detected by mainstream Americans for whom only one social marker—race—separates “the elite” from “the masses.”

Thus far, this article has provided a contextual backdrop for a general understanding of factors framing the experiences of Haitian immigrants in the United States, from reasons for migration to relational dynamics with other residents, including other Haitian immigrants. The following sections of the article will focus more specifically on the experiences of Haitian immigrant young people in American schools; however, the themes and issues raised previously will reemerge and inform the discussion.

### **Language and Schooling**

There may be one issue on which all Haitian immigrants agree: Education is the key to the future. From youth to adults, my interviews in the Boston area revealed that access to educational opportunities was perceived as one of the most valuable benefits of migration. Yet schools also represent a powerful site where contests over power, place, and identity are played out.

*The Stigma of Kreyòl.* As noted earlier, language holds significance with regard to social status in Haiti, so the presence of Kreyòl, rather than French, in Haitian bilingual classrooms created an opportunity for the re-creation of class-based hierarchies. A story from my fieldwork in schools serves to illustrate the role of language in maintaining class boundaries. I had been invited to speak to a group of high school students by a Haitian bilingual teacher at a neighborhood school in Boston with a large concentration of Haitian immigrants. The teacher felt that the students were not getting along very well, splitting themselves into factions based on the perception among some that their peers were not “Haitian enough.”<sup>4</sup> He wanted me to address these issues in my talk with them. The conversation had been proceeding very well, with the students

expressing honestly to one another how they perceived their own identities, but a major discussion ensued when a student criticized those of her peers who did not want to speak Kreyòl. I offered that it was important to be proud of one's heritage, and that language was one of the markers of heritage that should be embraced. A young man, R., raised his hand and observed that I was speaking of Kreyòl as if it were a real language when in fact it is not a real language (it should be noted that the language of this exchange was, ironically, Kreyòl). I could not believe my ears. I had heard arguments like this before, but from adults of my parents' generation. I was stunned and disappointed to hear them from a teenager. The comment triggered a heated debate among the students, some of whom felt R.'s statements symbolized exactly the problems of having united within the Haitian community that began our discussion. When I asked R. from where he got his ideas about Kreyòl, he said he had been taught by his father. He also indicated that the strongest evidence against Kreyòl being a real language was that no one studies it. I explained that he was quite wrong, that there were scholars of all stripes who studied Kreyòl. R. was surprised to hear this, and I could tell that this new bit of information was a significant discovery, but I knew that one hour on a random afternoon was not enough to counter 18 years of teaching from his father. About a month later, I was invited back to speak to the same group of students. The following excerpt is from my field diary:

I went back to talk to the Haitian bilingual class at Southside High<sup>5</sup> today...In addition to giving them an overview of Kreyòl Language Studies, I gave them a copy of the Kreyòl alphabet and of the grammatical rules for reading and writing Kreyòl put out by the Haitian National Bureau on Alphabetization. At first I thought the students were kind of bored because they were very quiet while I was talking, and I wasn't getting that many head nods, but as soon as I finished they started asking a million questions and discussing among themselves and with me what was the future of Kreyòl...I talked about how we as Haitians were taught to view our language as inferior because of enslavement and racism, and explained how internalized

racism causes us even today to be ashamed of our language and view it as lesser or inadequate. [R.] of course had many arguments, but it was a wonderful exchange and I was invited to come back next school year.

In her exploration of the differentiated meanings of French and Kreyòl for monolingual and bilingual speakers, Zéphir (1995) argued that, contrary to expectation, it is not only the bilingual bourgeoisie who have resisted attempts to reform Haitian education by using Kreyòl as the primary language for instruction. Indeed, according to Zéphir, the monolingual lower class has a vested interest in acquiring French “because of its symbolic power for social mobility” (190). Though I cannot fully assert that the student, R., who raised objections about my speaking about Kreyòl as if it were a “real” language came from a family that was not high up in Haiti’s social hierarchy, based on the school setting and the average educational, occupational, and income levels of Haitian families represented at the school, it would be safe to assume that the story corroborates Zéphir’s assertion.

These internal (to the community) tensions notwithstanding, the fact is that the majority of Haitian students in American schools need, and are entitled to, instruction in a language they understand: Kreyòl. Yet this basic fact also reveals important political and ideological struggles within the dominant U.S. culture—issues that intersected in interesting ways with Haitian students’ pathways to identity formation, as will be shown later.

*Bilingual Education Policies.* Though bilingual education has been a source of tremendous controversy across the United States, large metropolitan areas generally have been able to offer language support to their English Learner (EL) students. Since groups of immigrants from the same country have a tendency to settle near one another, many school districts are able to offer programs for the most commonly spoken languages in a district or town. For example, East Coast urban school districts, such as New York City’s, Boston’s, and Miami’s, generally have had the resources to offer ELs and their families access to instruction, instructional materials, and school information in their native languages. Given the current state of affairs in the language education of ELs in Boston, it is ironic that Massachusetts was the first state to establish (in 1971) widespread

transitional bilingual programs in public schools (Ryan, 2002). Specifically, in 2002, millionaire Ron Unz successfully lobbied for a ballot initiative to end bilingual education in Massachusetts—as he had done in California in 1998 (with Proposition 227) and in Colorado in 2001—and it passed. More than a decade later, unsurprisingly, Boston finds its EL student population flailing (Quinn, 2013). Of course, in the same way that language is a stand-in for contests over social status in Haiti and among Haitians in the Diaspora, the English-Only war is a thin disguise for xenophobia. As Ryan (2002) put it, “Bilingual education needs to be recognized as an effective educational method, and the attempts to eliminate it need to be exposed as unlawful, politically and pedagogically unsound, and culturally biased” (p. 488). Language policies in general, and language policies in schools specifically, are an important feature of the context of reception (Portes & Borocz, 1989) that immigrant children and youth encounter as they work to make sense of their new home. Philosopher Charles Taylor argued that “our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves” (Taylor, 1994, p. 25). Whether the contempt is communicated explicitly through slurs or discriminatory practices, or more subtly via language policies, immigrant children receive the messages society communicates to them and use those messages to inform their identity formation (Doucet & Suárez-Orozco, 2006).

### **Ethnic Options**

Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) define a typology of identity styles that recognizes the incredibly fluid nature of ethnic identification among youth. Identities and styles of adaptation are powerfully linked to context and social mirroring. The identity style a young person chooses has implications for adaptation to the new society, including schooling experiences.

*Co-Ethnic Identities.* Some immigrant-origin youth maintain a largely co-ethnic focus, socializing, working, and living among others from their own ethnic groups. Some may do so because they have limited opportunity to make meaningful contact with other groups in the host

culture. Others may be responding to an understanding that a group with which they may have extensive contact are even more disparaged than they are as immigrants. In conducting her research with second-generation Haitian youth, Zéphir (2001) found that those youth who had migrated at high school age and who thus retained their French accents bore these as a point of pride because they felt it distinguished them from African Americans. Compared to her participants who were born in the United States or who had migrated at younger ages, those who migrated as young adults were far more critical of African American culture and made conscious efforts not to associate with African Americans.

Other youth of immigrant origin may develop an adversarial stance constructing identities around rejecting—after having been rejected by them—the institutions of the dominant culture. Princeton sociologist Alejandro Portes observes, “As second generation youth find their aspirations for wealth and social status blocked, they may join native minorities in the inner-city, adopting an adversarial stance toward middle-class white society, and adding to the present urban pathologies” (Portes, 1993). Immigrant children who find themselves structurally marginalized and culturally disparaged are more likely to respond to the challenges to their identities by developing an adversarial style of adaptation (Vigil, 1988).

Among children of immigrants who gravitate toward adversarial styles, embracing aspects of the culture of the dominant group is equated with giving up one’s own ethnic identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Like other disenfranchised youth, children of immigrants who develop adversarial identities tend to encounter problems in school and drop out, and consequently face unemployment in the formal economy. Among youth engaged in adversarial styles, speaking Academic English and doing well in school may be interpreted as a show of hauteur and as a wish to “act White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). When adolescents believe that doing well in school is symbolically viewed as an act of ethnic betrayal, it becomes problematic for them to develop the behavioral and attitudinal repertoire necessary to succeed in school.

One of the 1.5-generation participants in the Boston study, Anne-Marie, articulated the difficulty of being in a college preparatory track while the majority of her Haitian friends were not. When asked if her friends helped her in school, she responded, “No. They’re not

doing anything I'm doing. Where I am is too different from where they are. We have different classes, different work, different interests." And though she tried both to pursue her academic interests and remain connected to her Haitian peers, there were tensions: "I sometimes feel like I have to sit with Haitians, even if I don't want to because otherwise they would talk, say that I am ignoring them."

The children of immigrants who are not able to embrace their own cultures and who have formulated their identities around rejecting aspects of the mainstream society may be drawn to gangs. For such youth, in the absence of meaningful opportunities, gang membership becomes incorporated into their sense of identity. Gangs offer their members a sense of belonging, solidarity, protection, support, discipline, and warmth. Gangs also structure the anger many feel toward the society that violently rejected their parents and themselves. Although many second-generation youth may look toward gangs for cues about dress, language, and attitude, most remain on the periphery and eventually outgrow the gang mystique after working through the identity issues of adolescence. Others drawn to the periphery—and even to the epicenter—of gangs are disproportionately represented in the penal system. The gang ethos provides a sense of identity and cohesion for marginal youth during a turbulent stage of development while facing urban poverty and limited economic opportunity, ethnic minority status and discrimination, lack of training and education, and a breakdown in the social institutions of school and family (Vigil, 1988). Clearly, adversarial styles quite severely compromise the future opportunities of immigrant-origin youth who already are at risk of school failure because of poverty, inequality, and discrimination.

*Ethnic Flight.* At the other end of the spectrum, some children of immigrant origin shed their cultures, identifying most strongly with the dominant mainstream culture (Berry, 1997). Taking ethnic flight, these youth may feel most comfortable spending time with peers from the mainstream culture rather than with their less acculturated peers. For these youth, learning to speak Academic English not only serves an instrumental function of communicating, but it also becomes an important symbolic act of identifying with the dominant culture. Among these youth, success in school may be seen both as a route for individualistic

self-advancement and as a way to symbolically and psychologically move away from the world of the family and the ethnic group.

Often this identification with the mainstream culture results in weakening of the ties to members of their own ethnic group. These young people all too frequently are alienated from their less acculturated peers; they may have little in common or may even feel they are somewhat superior to them. While they may gain entry into privileged positions within mainstream culture, they will still have to deal with issues of marginalization and exclusion.

In an earlier era of scholarship, this style of adaptation was termed “passing” (DeVos, 1992). While there were gains for the children of immigrants who “disappear” into the mainstream culture, there were also hidden costs—primarily in terms of unresolved shame, doubt, and self-hatred. While “passing” may have been a common style of adaptation among those who phenotypically “looked” like the mainstream, it is not easily available to today’s immigrants of color who visibly look like the “Other.” Further, while ethnic flight is a form of adaptation that can be adaptive in terms of “making it” by the mainstream society’s standards, it frequently comes at a significant social and emotional cost. Among Haitians, the term for youth who adopt this identity style is “undercover Haitians.” Zéphir (2001) describes them in this way: “Undercover second-generation Haitian immigrants go to great length [*sic*] to conceal any trace of their Haitian identity directly associated with Haiti. They endeavor to camouflage as much evidence of their origin as they can. For them, Haiti and Haitians are symbols of shame and embarrassment, and constant reminders of a difficult past that must be discarded. Undercover Haitian youth believe that there is absolutely nothing to be gained from claiming any sort of Haitianness. On the contrary, they are convinced that it is an invitation to be ridiculed, to be labeled, to be marginalized, and to be excluded altogether from meaningful participation in American life” (99). Haitian youth born in the United States who choose to go “undercover” often identify as African Americans, while those who migrated later in life and thus still carry an accent claim to be from Canada, France, or some other French Caribbean country. In our studies, we did not have occasion to interact with young people who were in denial of being Haitian altogether, though Doucet had difficulty recruiting

U.S.-born participants in certain schools, partly because some students chose not to identify themselves as Haitian or Haitian-American.

*Transcultural Identities.* In between the co-ethnic and ethnic flight gravitational fields, we find the large majority of children of immigrants. The task of immigration for these children is crafting a transcultural identity. These youth must creatively fuse aspects of two or more cultures—the parental tradition and the new culture or cultures. In so doing, they synthesize an identity that does not require them to choose between cultures—rather, they are able to develop an identity that incorporates traits of both cultures, all the while fusing additive elements (Falicov, 2002). Such is the identity challenge of youth of immigrant origin—their developmental task requires crafting new cultural formations out of two systems that are at once their own and foreign. These children achieve bicultural and bilingual competencies that become an integral part of their sense of self.

Among youth engaged in transcultural styles, the culturally constructed social strictures and patterns of social control of their immigrant parents and elders maintain a degree of legitimacy. Learning Academic English and doing well in school are viewed as competencies that do not compromise their sense of who they are. These youth network, with similar ease, among members of their own ethnic group as well as with students, teachers, employers, colleagues, and friends of other backgrounds. A number of studies in recent years have demonstrated a link between racial and ethnic identity pathways and academic outcomes (Gibson, 1988; Ogbu & Herbert, 1998). These studies suggest a pattern that implies that those who forge transcultural identities are most successful academically.

Many who “make it” clearly perceive and appreciate the sacrifices loved ones have made to enable them to thrive in a new country. Rather than wishing to distance themselves from parents, these youth come to experience success as a way to “pay back” their parents for their sacrifices. At times, they experience a form of “survivor guilt” as a result of the deprivation their parents and other family members have suffered in order to move to the new land. Among many such adolescents, success in school serves not only the instrumental function of achieving self-advancement and independence, but also, perhaps even more important, the expressive function of making the parental sacrifices worthwhile by “becoming a somebody.” To “make it,” for such

youth, may involve restitution by “giving back” to parents, siblings, peers, and other less fortunate members of the community.

By acquiring competencies that enable them to operate within more than one cultural code, transcultural youth are at an advantage. These styles of adaptation are highly context dependent and fluid. An immigrant youth might first gravitate toward one style of adaptation. Over time, as she matures and as her context changes, she may be drawn into new attitudes and social behaviors. The unilinear assimilationist model that results in styles of adaptation we term ethnic flight is no longer feasible. Today’s immigrants are not unambivalently invited to join the mainstream society. The rapid abandonment of the home culture implied in ethnic flight almost always results in the collapse of the parental voice of authority. Furthermore, lack of group connectedness results in anomie and alienation. The key to a successful adaptation involves the acquisition of competencies that are relevant to the global economy while maintaining the social networks and connectedness essential to the human condition. Those who are at ease in multiple social and cultural contexts will be most successful and will be able to achieve higher levels of maturity and happiness.

In my research with second-generation Haitian youth, I found students who embodied the entire spectrum of identity styles that the Suárez-Orozcos found among 1.5-generation students. I was also fascinated to witness the ways in which second-generation youth negotiated their identities vis-à-vis their 1.5-generation counterparts. In particular, ethnic clubs at the high schools where I conducted my fieldwork were important sites where youth transacted, understood, and made sense of their ethnic identities. Ethnic clubs simultaneously prescribed identities and supported Haitian youths’ development of agency around issues of race and ethnicity.

### **Comparing Boston and Cambridge**

To set a backdrop for the findings I will discuss here, it is important to highlight one of the first discoveries I made in conducting this research, and that is the difference between the Haitian communities of Boston and Cambridge. First, Haitians have a longer history in Boston, particularly with respect to deliberate community formation, such that

Boston has numerous Haitian-owned and -operated nonprofit community service organizations, businesses, and social clubs, as well as a newspaper, the *Boston Haitian Reporter*. Although it is possible that Haitians settled in Cambridge as early as they did in Boston, there does not appear to be a history of community formation in Cambridge to the extent that there is in Boston. Second, there seems to be a social-class difference between the two communities in that Boston tends to have more middle-class Haitians with professional occupations, higher education, and their own homes. Perhaps because the Boston community has been there longer, there has been more access, more connections (i.e., to get a loan, find a landlord, find a realtor). Therefore, at the time of the study, even newcomer families in Boston lived in modest homes in decent neighborhoods. By contrast, in Cambridge, the majority of newly arrived Haitians resided in a housing project nicknamed “*twa timoun*” (three children), because of the three enormous high-rise buildings that housed most residents of the development. Finally, because Boston is a larger city with more school attendance zones, Haitian youth are more likely to attend schools where they are either in the majority or comprise a significant proportion of the population, especially in high school. Cambridge, on the other hand, has one public high school. These contrasts had important implications for ethnic identification among youth in the two cities.

### **Ethnic Clubs**

I spent the most time with a Haitian Club at two high schools—one in a middle-class neighborhood of Boston (I’ll refer to that school as “Westside”) and the other at the public high school in Cambridge, “Riverside.” At both these schools, I volunteered as an advisor to the clubs. In addition to the Haitian Club, Riverside High School in Cambridge had a Black Student Union (BSU), whereas Westside did not.

Among the primary functions of the Haitian Club at the high schools were the maintenance, exchange, and reproduction of cultural practices. Traditional Haitian dance featured as a prominent activity in both clubs, and students performed these dances at school assemblies. The clubs also celebrated major Haitian holidays and often planned formal activities around them, such as putting on plays, participating in parades, or hosting assemblies about the holiday at their schools. Kreyòl

was the primary language spoken at most club meetings—the significance of which I will revisit below—though some conversations occurred in English and numerous students mixed English words with Kreyòl. The Haitian Club also served an important social function, providing students with a safe space for “being themselves” (telling jokes, complaining about teachers, flirting, planning parties, connecting with friends after school, etc.). The club advisors—typically a guidance counselor at the school—used the clubs as a vehicle to talk to students about more serious issues, like preparing for college, safe sex, resolving conflict, and Haitian politics. Clubs made attempts to engage in community outreach or community building, some of which were more successful than others—at Westside there was talk of taking a trip to Little Haiti in Florida to do volunteer work that never materialized; students at Westside connected to a Haitian club at another high school, Parkside, and they engaged in one or two joint activities; and at Riverside, an annual parent-appreciation banquet was held by the club to celebrate their families. Finally, I found that the clubs represented a site where students negotiated ethnic identity, and that, although there were some similarities in how this was manifested at Westside and Riverside, there also were important differences.

### **Ethnic Clubs and Identity Formation**

Some policing of ethnic identity occurred through Haitian clubs at all the schools where I conducted observations, and at the schools where there was no Haitian Club, Haitian bilingual classrooms served this policing function, as I will discuss later. I heard from some second-generation students that they felt uncomfortable at Haitian Club meetings because they did not speak Kreyòl well or had never visited Haiti. One second-generation informant at Riverside believed that members of Haitian Clubs did not think Haitian American students were “Haitian enough,” and therefore were not welcome at Haitian Club meetings. The membership of Westside’s Haitian Club was a lot more inclusive with respect to 1.5- and second-generation students, but language was an issue there as well. At one meeting, the club advisor was telling a story from Plato’s *Republic* and casually asked whether he should read from his book in English or translate “live” into Kreyòl. One young man, who had migrated as an infant and spoke English with no trace of an accent, wanted the story in English.

Immediately, one of his peers chastised him for not making more of an effort to improve his Kreyòl, and a small discussion ensued about whether or not it was appropriate to speak English at Haitian Club meetings.

As I intimated earlier, the difference in the organization of school attendance zones in Boston and Cambridge seemed to contribute to some of the different ways in which ethnic identity was negotiated at Westside and Riverside. Second-generation youth at Riverside were more likely than their counterparts at Westside to adopt the “undercover Haitian” identity defined previously. Interestingly, “going undercover” in Cambridge manifested most strongly around belonging to the Haitian Club or belonging to the Black Student Union. As I noted earlier, second-generation students at Riverside perceived Haitian Club as only for the “real” Haitians—that is, those who spoke fluent Kreyòl, ate Haitian food, listened to Haitian music, and danced Haitian dances. So the few second-generation students who were members of Haitian Club displayed these cultural markers explicitly. The BSU, on the other hand, was about pan-ethnic Black identity. Haitian students at Riverside—particularly second-generation youth—felt “forced” to choose between identifying as Haitian (or Haitian American) or identifying with a pan-ethnic Black label as a show of solidarity with other Black students at their high school, where there was a history of racial tension. Consequently, second-generation Haitian students who belonged to BSU avoided speaking Kreyòl, socializing with 1.5-generation Haitian students, or providing any clues about their ethnic origins. Among BSU members, there was a sense that any attempt by Black ethnic groups to highlight their own culture was an act of separatism. The following excerpt from field notes taken during an informal conversation with one second-generation student (Verna) and one 1.5-generation student (Marlyse) illustrates this pattern:

The Cape Verdean members of the BSU have decided to do a dance number for the Black History Month assembly. Verna tells me the Cape Verdean students are now “catching attitudes” and “thinking they’re better than everybody.” She said yesterday they were practicing above the cafeteria (in the teachers’ cafeteria) and “putting their music really loud and disturbing the BSU

meeting.” Marlyse says she had to go tell them to put the volume down. According to [the first informant], the Cape Verdeans are worse than the Haitians [referring to 1.5-ers] (“you know how Haitians only want to do stuff if it’s Haitian? Well Cape Verdeans are 300 times worse”). She thinks they want to separate themselves. Earlier Marlyse had been saying that a Haitian friend of hers told her she doesn’t want to dance with the Haitian Club because the BSU students don’t like them and make fun of them. Verna adamantly disagreed. She said that maybe it was the case last year, but this year is different, and the BSU kids are her friends and they don’t feel that way. The Cape Verdean students seem to be the new scapegoats now, and it seems to me that this is a reflection of the pressure on Black students get at this school to just be Black and not acknowledge their diverse backgrounds.

Another story from my field notes illustrates the conflict between Haitian Club and BSU at Riverside. I had attended a BSU meeting to recruit potential participants, and after presenting the study, I stayed around for the rest of the meeting, which consisted of a video of the Black History Month Assembly that had taken place a couple of weeks prior:

There is one dance by the Haitian Club, but the students fast-forward through it, complaining that all the Haitian Club ever does is dance. A few students here are also from Haitian Club and I can see that some of them are offended, but it is obvious that they do not intend to protest. There are a lot of problems at this school between the Haitian Club and the BSU, from what I am told. I was first exposed to it when, at one of my first Haitian Club meetings at Riverside, I heard that the Haitian Club was not being permitted to perform for the Kwanzaa celebration assembly by the BSU. There are, of course, varied accounts of what the real issue is. Some students claim that the BSU thinks all the dances Haitian

Club do are voodoo-infused and thus want no part of it.

So on one hand, the BSU and Haitian Club at Riverside delimited the boundaries of ethnic identification, which restricted many students from straddling ethnic worlds—at least at school. On the other hand, I witnessed both Haitian Club and BSU as sites where students felt they could be themselves and could exert control over the contours of ethnic identification. Though this may have created anxiety for some students, to the extent that these adolescents were making sense of ethnic and racial politics at their school, one also could look at this through the lens of student agency, recognizing that the clubs were a site where students could exercise their voice and be in charge of their own sense-making around these complex issues.

The Haitian Club at Westside High School permitted much more fluidity in terms of students' exploration of Haitian ethnic identity. As I noted, more club members than at Riverside were second-generation youth. Haitian and Haitian-American students also comprised over 50 percent of the Black population at the school, so the racial politics at Westside were less complicated by ethnicity for Black students. Solidarity with one another as Black students was, for many students, equivalent to solidarity with one another as Haitians. Interestingly, the Westside Haitian Club advisor also displayed a more eclectic ethnic identity, for instance, opening one club meeting with a breathing meditation using yoga breathing techniques. What is fascinating about Westside is that during my second year of fieldwork, the Haitian Club never got off the ground. The club president and other officers had graduated, and it seems the club advisor was unable to get another group of students to take on leadership of the club. I never would have expected this outcome based on my observations during the first year of data collection, but during a conversation with the advisor about what had happened, he shared that he had had a difficult year with a new Haitian teacher at the school. From my field notes:

Quick conversation with Mr. T., whom I have not seen all year because there was no Haitian Club at Westside this year. He tells me he's been having a bad week because of dealing with a teacher. She's a Haitian woman who teaches French at the high school. The

odd thing about her is that she refuses to speak Kreyòl, whether speaking to other Haitian teachers, Haitian students, or their parents. She says Kreyòl is not a language, and claims she does not mean it disrespectfully. Mr. T. [is angry about this] because even when he speaks to her in Kreyòl, she responds in English. She started a French club and got the Haitian kids to join it since the Haitian Club was slow to get started. Mr. T. feels like she has stolen all the kids who would be in Haitian club and he can't get them to participate in any Haitian activities.

Thus, while Westside may not have had the same problems as Riverside with respect to ethnic conflict among Black students, the school was not free from identity politics around ethnicity, and, like at Riverside, ethnic clubs became a vehicle for expressing these issues. This case, in particular, exposes some of the language and class conflicts I discussed earlier. Thus, by insisting on speaking French to Haitian colleagues, parents, and students, the French teacher at Westside was invoking important status distinctions with particular meaning for the Haitian community and imposing an identity that displaced the home language of most, if not all, Haitian and Haitian-American students at the school. Here again we see the danger of ethnic clubs prescribing identity in a certain way and therefore stifling student voices. For students who are not in leadership positions and who are not part of conversations that determine the boundaries of identity within their schools, this can be particularly detrimental and alienating. Still, the potential for ethnic clubs to provide students a space for arguing, exploring, and claiming identities—especially immigrant students and students of color—should not be underestimated.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, I have focused on Haitian immigrant youth in order to highlight distinct aspects of their experiences as these inform identity formation. This is not to suggest that other Black immigrant groups (or U.S. African Americans) do not share many of these experiences—or at least variations on these themes. Indeed, as noted in the introduction,

the racial politics of the United States make it such that Black people, as a racial category, collectively experience the consequences of living under a racist and White supremacist hegemony. It is also important, however, to highlight differences among descendants of the African Diaspora to ensure that we do not become an (ironically) invisible monolith. The American obsession with race as *the* significant marker of identity can lend too easily to assuming that, “since their skin colors match,” Jamaicans, Ghanaians, Guayanese, and African Americans are all the same. The experiences of Haitian immigrant youth that I have shared here demonstrate that, as youth craft identities, they contend with many of the socially reproduced features of Haitian society, U.S. society, *and* the intersections of these in the American context. Furthermore, high school ethnic clubs represented an important site where these issues could be contested and negotiated. This speaks to the importance of giving youth safe spaces to test, question, and even challenge the meanings of being “ethnic” as they develop their own sense of self.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The ACS includes both documented and undocumented persons; however, census counts cannot capture all segments of the undocumented population, leading some to assert that the population of Haitian immigrants is generally undercounted (Zéphir, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> While Laguerre (1984) numbers this group at 500, Zéphir (2004) puts the number at 200.

<sup>3</sup> Fishman (1967) has made the case that full community bilingualism is not a prerequisite of diglossia, but following the brilliant work of Yves Dejean (1993), I adopt the more basic definition of *diglossia*, which assumes two languages are available to all speakers at all times, should they choose to use them (Fishman, 1967; Dejean, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> See Zéphir (2001) for a useful discussion of “strong and weak forms of Haitianness” as perceived by children of Haitian immigrants.

<sup>5</sup> To respect privacy and confidentiality, names of students, teachers, and schools are pseudonyms.