



Identities and their complexities: a review essay of trends in ethnic identification among second-generation Haitian immigrants in New York City by Flore Zéphir

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Recently, I came home to an official-looking letter from the *Americans for Immigration Control* that urgently opened with, “Dear U.S. Citizen, You are hereby requested to answer the enclosed questionnaire concerning proposals to make significant changes in the current U.S. Immigration Policy . . .” Posing as a legitimate study, the survey asked questions subtly laced with the implication that immigration is out of control and that “we U.S. Citizens” are in danger of losing our nation to masses of foreigners. Underlying statements such as these is the long-standing fear that immigrants will never assimilate into “American culture.” Recent scholarly work on assimilation among immigrants has convincingly demonstrated that this fear is unfounded (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut, 1999; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) as immigrants do become absorbed into the complex fabric of U.S. society. It is the case, however, that the process of assimilation is not linear or unidimensional (Suárez-Orozco, 2002). As Portes and Zhou (1993) argued, “segmented assimilation” is the best way to describe the varying ways in which today’s immigrants become part of U.S. society, some integrating into mainstream culture, others becoming part of the underclass, and still others becoming successful through ethnic solidarity and the preservation of their own cultures.

Black immigrant groups, whose children are now being born and/or raised in the U.S., have added interesting complications to our existing understanding of “assimilation” (Glick-Schiller & Fouron 1990; Laguerre, 1984, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut 2001; Portes & Stepick, 1993; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Rumbaut & Portes 2001; Waters, 1990, 1996a, 1996b, 1999).

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In the U.S., where skin color is the most powerful characteristic for social stratification and discrimination (Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1990; Omni and Winant, 1986), Black immigrants face particular obstacles as they attempt to become integrated into U.S. society, most notably racism. But there is important diversity within this immigrant category. In her latest book entitled *Trends in Ethnic Identification Among Second-Generation Haitian Immigrants in New York City*, Flore Zéphir (2001) aptly demonstrates how race, ethnicity, class and immigration together have created a daunting set of obstacles for Haitian youth as they try to assimilate into American society. Among Black immigrants, Haitians are an interesting case because they consistently have been stigmatized and discriminated against by the U.S. government (Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1990). Haitians also are represented disproportionately among the working-class and poor in the U.S., and the impact of socioeconomic status on the development of ethnic identity is elegantly and powerfully demonstrated in this book.

In her previous book based on a study of first generation Haitian immigrants, Zéphir (1996) predicted that the first generation of Haitian immigrants would transmit their sense of a Haitian ethnic identity to their children via strong familial links. In *Trends in Ethnic Identification*, she seeks to test this prediction. Zéphir's main argument is that, unlike their parents (for whom Haitian ethnicity is "a situational response to an unwelcome and . . . nefarious system of classification and identification in American society") (2001, p. 1), the children of Haitian immigrants display multiple ethnic identities that are fluid and complex. Zéphir proposes that the variations appear to be attributable primarily to two sets of factors—the ethnic socialization that occurs in the homes of Haitian immigrants, and their children's own understandings of U.S. race relations and opportunity structures developed via interactions outside the home (with peers, in schools, and in their communities and society at large).

To address her questions about the expressions of ethnic identity among children of Haitian immigrants, Zéphir collected data in Brooklyn and Queens, New York, two well-known enclaves of Haitian immigrants, through interviews with high school students, college undergraduates, college graduates, parents of the student informants, and several first-generation Haitian educators and administrators. Zéphir also conducted participant observations in the schools and homes of study informants. As a point of clarification, it is useful to note that the definition of "generation" used by Zéphir refers literally to lineage, so that the "second generation" who are the focus of the book are *all* children of Haitian immigrants, regardless of the age at which these youth migrated to the U.S. In other words, even young people who migrated in their late adolescent years are included in Zéphir's "second generation." This differs from current trends in immigration literature. According to the definitions used by most immigration scholars today, a foreign-born person who migrates as an adolescent is a first-generation (1.00) immigrant, and a person born in the U.S. to at least one foreign-born parent is a second-generation (2.00) immigrant (Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1990; Levitt & Waters 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993; Rong & Brown, 2001; Rong & Grant, 1992). Another nuance in the designation of generational status is that children of immigrant parents who migrate as children are considered the 1.5-generation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Rong & Brown, 2001; Rong & Grant, 1992). In the literature on immigrant youth, the term "Second Generation" has been used by researchers to include both 1.5-generation and 2.00-generation children of immigrant parents

(Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1990; Levitt & Waters, 2002; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou 1993). The participants in Zéphir's study do represent the range of generational status among children of Haitian immigrants, from the U.S.-born and raised, to the Haiti-born and U.S. raised, but they also include young adults both born and raised in Haiti. This latter group is the 1.00-generation, and while Zéphir does define them as such, she includes them in her analysis of ethnic identification among *second generation* youth. I point this out because, as will be discussed in more detail later, Zéphir's approach to generational status in this study creates some quandaries for making this research comparable with other research on the children of immigrants. Interestingly, Zéphir includes in her sample young people born to Haitian parents in countries other than Haiti or the U.S., who then migrated to the U.S. at various ages. Zéphir labels this group the .5-generation to indicate their status as newcomers both to the U.S. and to the broader "Haitian community." Given that the Haitian Diaspora is spread throughout the world (Glick-Schiller & Fouron, 1990), and that the pulls of economics and globalization continue to draw migrants to the U.S., understanding the identity development of the ".5-generation" is timely and important.

Zéphir's findings can be organized around three central themes: expressions of ethnic identity, class dimensions of ethnic identity, and how these issues are manifested in the families and schools of immigrant youth. Zéphir suggests that participants' sense of ethnic identity is related to their own generational status, as other researchers have reported (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Using a continuum from "stronger form of Haitianess" to "weaker form of Haitianess," Zéphir identifies distinctions among her research participants based on the ethnic labels they choose, their place of birth and length of residency in Haiti, command of Haitian Creole, degree of involvement in the Haitian community, level of interest in Haitian issues in Haiti and the U.S., how closely they cling to a Haitian lifestyle (eating Haitian food, listening to Haitian music, etc.), whether they affiliate themselves only with other Haitians or with other groups as well, and, finally, their "look," referring to clothing, hair styles, and manners of carrying themselves (Zéphir, 2001, p. 66).

Based on these criteria, I did not find it surprising that Zéphir reported the "stronger form of Haitianess" was more likely to be manifested among the 1.00 generation those who had been born and raised in Haiti, to whom she also refers as monocultural. At the other end of the continuum, the U.S.-raised (1.5) and U.S.-born (2.00), or biculturals, were more likely to display a "weaker form of Haitianess." There is no doubt that birthplace and age at immigration have an important influence on acculturation. Therefore, I would argue that the measure of "Haitianess" used in this study is a better measure of generational status than ethnic identity, and that each generational category (1.00, 1.5, 2.00) represents a separate unit of analysis within which it would be possible to gauge varying expressions of Haitian ethnic identity.

The nutshell of Zéphir's argument, however, seems to have emerged from her findings on the influence of social class on ethnic identification. Although she found manifestations of both "stronger" and "weaker" forms of Haitianess among lower- and middle-class respondents, there was greater variation among the lower-class respondents. That is, "there were extreme positions within this group: It had the largest number of *authentic* Haitians as well as the largest number of biculturals who manifested the highest extent of affiliation with, and tolerance for, African Americans or other minority groups. Among her lower class participants, Zéphir also found "the overwhelming majority of Haitian undercovers, who seek

to conceal any trace of Haitianess and/or recent affiliation with Haiti by claiming a totally different identity, ranging from African American to West Indian, to newcomers from other locations such as Montreal, France, and Latin America” (Zéphir, p. 93). According to Zéphir, these youth are most likely to assimilate into the American “underclass”—specifically the “African American underclass.” This is attributed to the messages Haitian youth indirectly receive in their homes—middle class youth whose parents advocate traditional Haitian values and hard work can observe how living according to these standards have resulted in successful lives for their parents. Poor youth, whose parents advocate the same values and hard work, do not see the payoff of these ideals in their everyday lives. Their parents work hard, but they still live in housing projects, still have difficulty meeting basic needs, and their children give up on education or hard work as the means for success. The combination of being Black and being poor, Zéphir proposes, pushes Haitian youth living among the “African American underclass” to reject their Haitian ethnicity in order to be accepted by their peers. This has serious implications for American society in that it contributes to the expansion of the “Black underclass” in the United States.

Zéphir further argues that, compounding Haitian immigrant parents’ disappointment in the prospects of upward mobility, these parents discover, with time, more and more of the cultural differences between Haitian and American societies and strive to prevent their children from adopting American values. However, as other immigration scholars have noted, the children of immigrant parents gain mastery of the new culture and language more quickly, creating intergenerational conflict and dislocation of family roles (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). One of the most interesting features of Zéphir’s book is the insight she provides into Haitian family life and family structure, particularly as she highlights the major issues of conflict in these families.

Zéphir posits that these conflicts within the family are related to the ways in which Haitian immigrants have been received in U.S. society. The response of a host society to an immigrant group is known in the immigration literature as the “context of reception” (Stepick, Stepick, Eugene, Teed, & Labissiere, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). This is an important factor for understanding the group’s integration into, acceptance of, and success in a host society. Zéphir points out that Haitian parents are far less likely to make cultural compromises in a society that ostracizes and discriminates against them. Their children’s acceptance of this culture is then all the more difficult to understand, and even can be offensive. Unlike their parents, who considered the U.S. as a temporary home, none of Zéphir’s participants saw themselves returning to Haiti to live permanently. For all these young people, however, living in the U.S. involved a process of developing an ethnic identity. Other researchers have found that, rather than accepting a culture that rejects them, immigrant youth from ostracized groups are more likely to embrace their national origins than those from groups seen more favorably by mainstream Americans (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). This did not seem to be the case among Zéphir’s participants, but again, this was linked to socioeconomic status in that the poorer youth were more likely to reject a Haitian ethnic identity than their middle class or wealthy peers.

The role of socioeconomic status emerges again in Zéphir’s important discussion of the tremendous economic burdens faced by Haitian families. She argues that these burdens are largely responsible for the discord in many Haitian families. Other researchers have noted the deleterious effects of poverty in immigrant families on individual and family functioning

(Capps, 2001; Jurkovic et al., 2004; Luthar, 1999; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), but compounded with racism, Haitian families are at particular risk. Presenting what reads like a social policy plan to reform poverty, *Zéphir* offers a political critique of ghettos and calls upon Haitians themselves to examine their own role in the perpetuation of poverty among Haitian immigrants. This point is one of the most convincingly argued, as *Zéphir* strongly states, “Thus far, as an immigrant ethnic group in the United States, we are not standing: We are poor, we are not very educated, we endure hardships and experience family breakdowns, and we do not have a voice in American politics or representation in the decision-making apparatus” (*Zéphir*, p. 152). While this critique may seem unfairly harsh, those familiar with the economic and racial prejudice among Haitians themselves will be compelled to agree that “the eradication of prejudice should begin first and foremost at home” (*Zéphir*, p. 152).

Schools represent another site where the identities of immigrant youth are contested, as immigrant status, socioeconomic issues, and generational clashes between children and parents are played out. *Zéphir* discusses the incongruity between Haitian parents’ understanding of the purpose of education and the reality of schools in the U.S. For parents who attended school in Haiti—where schools are highly structured, teachers are the final authority, and learning is done exclusively “in the books”—U.S. schools come as quite a shock, most notably for the lack of discipline and respect students show their teachers. This is especially true for parents whose children attend disadvantaged urban schools. Parents begin to realize that although public education is free in the U.S., it is by no means equal across school districts, and their children’s chances of success are in fact limited by the very institution they believed would help their families climb the socioeconomic ladder.

Although *Trends in Ethnic Identification* obviously makes important contributions to our understanding of ethnic identity in immigrant groups, there are also some gaps in the work. First, the continuum of ethnic identity from “stronger form of Haitianess” to “weaker form of Haitianess,” while substantiated, does not allow for the complex configuration of identity styles that are manifested among immigrant youth (Fuligni, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). The evidence *Zéphir* provides to support the categories in her continuum suggests that identity is strongly tied to place of birth—that is, those participants who were born in Haiti and lived there at least 10 years (the 1.00 generation) were more likely to manifest the “stronger form of Haitianess,” whereas those who were born in the U.S. or who left Haiti at an early age (the 2.00 and 1.5 generation) were more likely to manifest the “weaker form of Haitianess.” But most of the recent work on identity development among immigrant youth (Fuligni, 2001; Rumbaut & Portes 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco 2001; Waters, 1999) suggests that identity is more complex than *Zéphir*’s continuum would seem to suggest. Rather than a linear trajectory from weak to strong, immigrant adolescents alternate between feeling strongly attached to their ethnic group to feeling more “American,” from behaving in ways that are more consistent with being from (or having parents from) another country, to behaving like their native born peers (Fuligni, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). In other words, ethnic identity is more nuanced, fluid, and situational, particularly among the U.S.-born children of immigrants.

In fact, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) argue that changes in ethnic and national self-identification are more likely to occur in the second generation—i.e., among the U.S.-born

children of immigrants—rather than the first. Rong and Brown (2001), in a paper on educational attainment among Black immigrants further argue that, “the problem with lumping all immigrant generations together is illustrated by comparing the educational attainment of Caribbean students who are mostly foreign born or the children of foreign-born parents with African Black students, some 95 percent of whom have lived in the United States for three or more generations. Studies that fail to consider the effects of length of residence in the United States on education mask intra-ethnic group generational differences and conceal the possible interactions between the effects of ethnicity and of generation on schooling” (p. 544). Although Zéphir’s work does not focus exclusively on educational attainment, she does discuss educational issues in relation to participants in her study. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to argue that the concerns raised by Rong and Brown (2001) with regard to generational status and educational attainment are also relevant to issues of identity.

Second. Zéphir’s arguments for eradicating discrimination and hate against Haitians seem to put Haitians and American Blacks in separate categories, and thus does not push hard enough on the point of racism against all Blacks. Zéphir suggests that if xenophobia against Haitian immigrants is eradicated, fewer Haitian immigrants will assimilate into the African American underclass, and “expansion of the Black underclass would definitely be inhibited” (p. 122). What is problematic about this particular way of framing the issue is that it attributes the rejection of Haitianess to *being* Black and poor, rather than to the xenophobia experienced by *all* those who are Black and poor. Furthermore, the suggestion that poor Haitian youth reject Haitian ethnicity to better fit in with their African American peers seems to blame African American youth for the choices Haitian youth make on the basis of their own experiences.

Mary Waters’ study of West Indian immigrants (1999) approaches the matter from a different perspective, suggesting that the “oppositional” stance adopted by Black immigrant youth of West Indian descent comes from their own experiences in American society (rather than the experiences of their African American peers). As Waters argues, “declining city services, a materialistic U.S. culture, failing inner-city schools, an economy that offers little hope to the least educated, and a society where black skin still closes doors and awakens hatred can destroy the chances of people who have sacrificed a great deal for a better life” (Waters, 1999, p. 335). I concur with this analysis and argue that it is the intolerance and hatred personally experienced by Haitian youth that leads to rejection of Haitian identity, rather than a desire to be accepted by African American peers.

These concerns notwithstanding, the book represents a major contribution to the small body of literature on Haitian immigrants and offers important insights into many dimensions of the Haitian immigrant experience. Although the study is located in New York City, Zéphir discusses issues of relevance to Haitian immigrants in other U.S. cities as well. In addition to provoking further thought about the concept of ethnic identity, the book provides important insights into parent–child relationships among Haitian immigrants and into the educational experiences of Haitian youth. *Trends in Ethnic Identification* also contains compelling messages to educators, policymakers, and practitioners, as Zéphir does not shy away from strongly political arguments throughout the book, and thus contributes an important voice as a Haitian scholar examining issues within the Haitian community.

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