

**Mothering Across Fragmented Borders of Blackness:  
Cross-Ethnic Ties Among African Immigrant, Caribbean Immigrant and African American Mothers**

Situated in Hartford, Connecticut's Albany Avenue, behind an African Methodist Episcopal Church and beneath the shadow of the large golden arches of a McDonald's logo, is Bravo Plaza. Lori's African Hair Braiding Boutique, Miller's Caribbean Grocery Store, "Golden Krust" Beef Patties, Coconut's Jewelry Warehouse and a Haitian-American owned dry cleaning service, line the perimeters of this small, public square. In the surrounding parking lot, friends and family members gather for small talk, social event promoters distribute fliers to patrons and the rhythms of Soca, Hip Hop and Reggae blast from the car stereos while their passengers indulge in fries, a Beef Patty or West Indian soda pop.

When viewed in light of the prevailing discourse on today's black immigrants, this center of cultural and commercial activity in Hartford's north end emerges as a place of discord. Newspaper and social media headlines such as, "Fighting for the Crumbs: African Americans vs. Black Immigrants," "African Immigrants Want No Community with African Americans" and "Caribbean Roots Tangle with African Americans in the U.S.," bring to the fore an image of African Americans and black immigrants as separate and combative camps.<sup>1</sup> Literature on the burgeoning multicultural and multiethnic populations of America suggest that African immigrants, Caribbean immigrants and native African Americans are distinct ethnic streams that run along parallel routes, but fail to cross paths.<sup>2</sup> Although these groups navigate the same American landscape, often live in the same neighborhoods and encounter similar experiences in a nation in which African ancestry is just cause

---

<sup>1</sup> Sam Dolnick, "For African Immigrants, Bronx Culture Clash Turns Violent, *The New York Times*, N.Y./Region, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/nyregion/20africans.html?\\_r=2&ref=nyregion&](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/nyregion/20africans.html?_r=2&ref=nyregion&), Eugene Walton, "African Immigrants Want No Community with African Americans Says New Book," *Lee Bailey's EurWeb.Com Electronic Urban Report*, <http://www.eurweb.com/2012/05/african-immigrants-want-no-community-with-african-americans-explains-new-book/>, Young Ward, *YardieNews.Com*, <http://yardienews.com/culture-conflict-caribbean-roots-tangle-with-african-american-in-u-s/>

<sup>2</sup> Prominent studies of the black immigrant waves of recent years that emphasize a ruptured relationship between foreign and native born blacks are Zain Abdullah's *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem* (Oxford University Press, 2010), Eugene Robinson's, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2010) and Mary C. Waters' *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

for marginalization, dissonance persists among them. Broader racial stereotypes work internally to distort and degrade images of the “other” black ethnics. Economic disparities are a central contributor to interethnic tensions. In *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*, Eugene Robinson argues that native blacks doubt the authenticity of the emerging immigrant population, and expresses the belief that these emergent groups use natives as “stepping-stones.”<sup>3</sup> As they tread the path of opportunity carved by the Civil Rights Movement they are benefitting more than native blacks who have been the brick layers of equality. In *Black Mecca*, Zain Abdullah notes that the increase in African immigrant merchants has particularly struck a chord with native blacks.<sup>4</sup> African Americans assert that black immigrants penetrate their black neighborhoods, open businesses, take their money and climb the socio-economic ladder without a backward glance. Black immigrants, “with their intact families and long-range mind-set,” see native blacks as severely lacking in the areas of motivation and self-help.<sup>5</sup> As suggested in Yoku Shaw-Taylor’s *The Other African Americans*, natives are deemed by their counterparts to be the gate keepers of “downward social and cultural mobility.”<sup>6</sup>

The contemporary scholarly focus on areas of tension and resentment between native and foreign born blacks is not a recent phenomenon, but rather rooted in a historical intellectual trend. During its formative years, between the 1920s and 1970s, sociological and historical works on the growing multiethnic black presence in the United States were not only fixated on moments of discord, but also functioned to “exacerbate the tensions between the groups resulting in deep animosity which made genuine intraracial cooperation impossible,” writes Violet M. Johnson.<sup>7</sup> Works such as Gilbert Osofsky’s *Harlem: The Making of Ghetto Negro New York 1890-1930*, published in 1962 and the University of Michigan’s 1985 scholarly compilation entitled *Black Immigration and Ethnicity in the United States: An Annotated Bibliography*, validated notions of ethnic-based superiority.<sup>8</sup> These studies confirmed that black immigrants were far more skillful in the fields of

---

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Robinson, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (New York: Random House, 2010), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Zain Abdullah, *Black Mecca*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 77.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, *Disintegration*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Harriet Pipes McAdoo, Sinead Younge, and Solomon Getahun, “Marriage and Family Socialization among Black Americans and Caribbean and African Immigrants,” in *The Other African Americans*, ed. Yoku Shaw-Taylor and Steven A. Tuch (United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 100.

<sup>7</sup> Violet M. Johnson, *The Other Black Bostonians: West Indians in Boston, 1900-1950* (Indiana University Press, 2006), 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

business and entrepreneurship than their native born black counterparts. A focus on the differences between these ethnic streams allowed writers to simplify, or as stated by Johnson, “downplay the salience of race in socio-economic mobility in the United States.”<sup>9</sup>

Following the 1970’s, scholarship blossomed that unraveled the narrowly focused comparative studies of preceding years. Works such as, Irma Watkins-Owens’ *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* (1996), Percy C. Hintzen’s *West Indians in the West* (1991) and Johnson’s *The Other Black Bostonians 1900-1950* (2006) returned to the lives and experiences of the black migrant waves of the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and illuminated interethnic narratives previously obscured. However, this revisionist trend, which has challenged interpretations of the black interethnic ties of the past, has not yet informed the literature on present day relations. Although intra-racial prejudice undoubtedly exists among African and Caribbean immigrants as well as African Americans, a disproportionate focus on lines of division and the erasure of moments of amity not only skews and simplifies the breadth of black interethnic ties, but also casts blacks as incapable of adapting to the increasingly multicultural society. Historically enduring images of black communities in America as dysfunctional, degenerate and primordial are reinforced by assertions of black interethnic dissonance and as stated by Regine O. Jackson in *The Other African Americans*, “generalized notions of black inferiority” are extended.<sup>10</sup> The predominant discourse taps into and expands an early form of cultural theory, marked by the 1965 Moynihan Report that defines black culture and family life as inherently pathological.

Most troublesome about this ubiquitous assertion of black dissonance, is its shaming of black motherhood – a pattern that has gone largely unnoticed. Native and foreign born black mothers are deployed as the reproductive force behind the impermeable ethnic boundaries and are regularly depicted as propagating interethnic prejudices among their families and children. Discussions of the child-rearing practices of black immigrant parents, and the tools they equip their children with to effectively navigate American society are

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> Regine O. Jackson, “Beyond Social Distancing: Intermarriage and Ethnic Boundaries among Black Americans in Boston,” in *The Other African Americans*, ed. Yoku Shaw-Taylor and Steven A. Tuch (United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 220.

central to an understanding of the development and ideological structure of the “new” African American community. However, the maternal wisdom observed and documented more often consists of admonitions against native blacks.<sup>11</sup> The thrust and driving force behind the exploration to follow is the contention that, true to its Moynihan ties, the existing literature has propelled the historical myth of the pathological black matriarch into the 21st century and has expanded the image beyond African American mothers to African immigrant and Caribbean immigrant mothers.

The present study returns to the borderlands of cross-ethnic interaction and disrupts the cyclical assertion of pathological and insular black motherhood by arguing that, as stated by Regine O. Jackson, “the pronounced ethnic boundaries that divide black Americans are permeable.”<sup>12</sup> On the basis of existing scholarship and original ethnographic research, this essay extends the historiography’s revisionist trend to conceptions of the present day black diasporas. It posits that interethnic relationships are in fact central to the daily lives of African immigrant, Caribbean immigrant and African American mothers, the populations most often charged with reproducing cultures of impermeability among their families and youth. Using the relationships among native and foreign born black mothers in Hartford as a springboard, this study asserts that the crossing, shifting and blurring of black ethnic boundaries is manifest in foreign-born black mothers’ reproduction of a racial identity in their children, the role of native black mothers as participants and informants in this development, and lastly, their collective resistance to structural barriers and systemic assaults against black motherhood.

The experience of black mothers in the understudied, majority minority city of Hartford, Connecticut provides a theoretical framework and impetus for the reevaluation and further exploration of the black interethnic dynamic. The existing research references in this paper is buttressed by original interviews conducted with seven mothers living in Hartford. Four of them were born in Anglophone African and

---

<sup>11</sup> As will be discussed later, this essay argues that this pattern is evident in a number of formative works, such as Philip Kasinitz, John H. Mollenkopf, Mary C. Water, and Jennifer Holdaway, *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Jackson, “Beyond Social Distancing,” 220.

Caribbean countries -- Jamaica, Barbados, Sierra Leone and Ghana, and three of the respondents are African American mothers.

This paper asserts that the borderland of cross-ethnic interaction is not a sphere of black pathology, but rather a sphere of possibility. The particular focus on the relations between foreign and native born black mothers displaces the invisibility of complex interethnic ties in the discourse as well as debases the legacy of devaluation specific to black mothers in America. Black motherhood emerges as fertile ground for an innovative, vibrant, multi-dimensional, hybrid culture rather than a negative reproductive force.

### *The Reproduction of Racial Identities*

As the number of black immigrants that cross America's shores increases each year, the amount of people thrown into the depths of blackness increases as well. On the black and shadowed end of the color line, the lives of black immigrants assume a fragility not experienced by their white immigrant counterparts. Their identities become subject to social and institutional discrimination, as well as enduring stereotypes and "outsider" perceptions that revoke one's individuality, nationality, and ethnic distinction. In his biographical essay, "The Prison Called My Skin: On Being Black in America," Olúfemi Táíwò captures this distinct black immigrant experience. He refers to 1990, the year he migrated to the United States from Nigeria as a "pivotal year" in which he "underwent a singular transformation."<sup>13</sup> Táíwò writes, "as soon as I entered the United States, my otherwise complex, multi-dimensional, and rich human identity became completely reduced to a simple, one-dimensional and non-human identity."<sup>14</sup> He was stripped of a key requisite to humanity -- the right to self-define. His use of the term "prison" as a symbol for black existence in America is a powerful one as it denotes the extent to which blackness yields confinement and regulation. Black immigrants, like their native born counterparts are considered to be a threat, unworthy of full citizenship and thus inhibited from occupying the "American space."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Olúfemi Táíwò, "This Prison Called My Skin: On Being Black in America," in *Problematizing Blackness: Self-Ethnographies by Black Immigrants to the United States*, eds. Percy C. Hintzen and Jean Muteba Rahier (New York: Routledge, 2003) 42.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 45.

Race consciousness is uncharted terrain for black immigrants. In speaking to the adjustment experiences of black Caribbean immigrants Milton Vickerman states in *Crosscurrents: West Indian Immigrants and Race* that, “The everyday lives of West Indian immigrants reveal to them that “blackness” carries a more severe stigma in the United States than in the West Indies. It takes them a long time to get used to this. In fact, the process of getting used to it tends to be quite painful.”<sup>16</sup> He suggests that West Indian immigrants “have enjoyed greater freedom to self-define their identities,” due to the emphasis on class differentiation in their home countries.<sup>17</sup> Assimilation is particularly trying for African immigrants. Unlike Caribbean immigrants, they do not have an extensive history of voluntary immigration to the United States, nor do they share with native blacks, “a historical experience of plantation slavery and the social construction of blackness in the 1800’s.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, black Caribbean immigrants are more likely to be equipped with at the least, an “abstract knowledge of racial conditions.”<sup>19</sup>

The lived experiences of black immigrant mothers in Hartford speak to the ways in which this unfamiliar black identity manifests as a painful weight to bear in the lives of black immigrants. Their limited employment opportunities and minimal professional respect from employers and co-workers illuminate the working world as a terrain particularly fraught with black specific stigma and prejudice. Fifty year old Jamaican immigrant and mother of two, Jillian asserts that when she first arrived to Hartford in 1980, at the age of 22, she had immense difficulty finding work. She applied for multiple clerical and administrative positions at hospitals, but was not successful in locating a job. She states that this was partly because she lacked work experience in the United States. However, she believes that race was a central cause of her unemployment. According to Jillian, when she spoke to potential employers on the phone, they were enthusiastic and encouraged her to come in for an interview. However, she states, “I go in and right away the direction of the interview switched.”<sup>20</sup> While her accent did not prompt interviewers to inquire about her birthplace and the location where she gained work experience over the telephone, it did during face to face conversations. This suggests that an aspect of

---

<sup>16</sup> Milton Vickerman, *Crosscurrents: West Indian Immigrants and Race*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), ix.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>18</sup> Shaw-Taylor, “The Intersection of Assimilation, Race, Presentation of Self, and Transnationalism in America,” 21.

<sup>19</sup> Vickerman, *Crosscurrents*, 137.

<sup>20</sup> Jillian, Interview, 3/12/2013

Jillian's appearance, arguably her race, caused employers to approach hiring her with hesitancy. Her physicality revoked her accent of its original appeal and acceptability. The extent to which race attributed to Jillian's minimal success is visible in an instance in which she was hired by a hospital, and then abruptly let go. She states,

I went in and they offered me the position, sent me a letter and said I had the position, how much I would make when I would start, and a week later, they called me back and said they needed to give me a second interview, I went in for the second interview and was told that I wasn't able to start because I have an accent and the patients coming in would have a problem with my accent, so I wasn't given the job... If then, I had the knowledge that I had now, I would have gone on with a lawsuit...I think that this should be discrimination.<sup>21</sup>

The delayed reaction of Jillian's employers to her accent suggests that another factor was at play in their decision to displace her. Jillian believes that her race, the only characteristic unnoted on her application and unseen by her employers prior to the second interview, contributed to her failure to receive the job. Jillian's recent realization of the possibility of racial discrimination makes clear that time and experience in the United States have equipped her with a racial consciousness and heightened awareness that she lacked upon first immigrating.

Jacqueline, a 44 year old Ghanaian immigrant, and mother of 11 and 12 year old sons, has also experienced racial discrimination in the working world. She asserts that after she earned her Master's degree and became director of a college women's center, white colleagues began to treat her differently. "I think for young African American women who are like myself, they are very much accepted until a certain age, when you start to face the racism, and I think that really happens at 30 when you move up the career ladder, and it seems like affirmative action, and you're made to believe you're there because of your race."<sup>22</sup> Jacqui suggests that as a black woman, her socio-economic progress has oddly enough led to the intensification of her degradation within the work environment. She senses her positioning beneath an oppressive and racialized gaze bounded by the assumption that her leadership role is undeserved and that she is lacking in the areas of independence and self-motivation. Jacqui's reflection also suggests that black immigrant women and mothers,

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline, Interview, 3/18/2013

must not only confront and manage racial discrimination, but gender discrimination as well. Black immigrant mothers discover that their life opportunities are exacerbated by multiple oppressions that intersect, strengthen and reinforce one another. With their newly minted racialized and sexualized bodies, black immigrant women find themselves sharing a “crooked room” with native black women.<sup>23</sup> According to Melissa Harris Perry, this room is filled with crooked images of black women characterized mirroring “degrading stereotypes” that “justify black women’s oppression in the United States.”<sup>24</sup> The interplay of race and gender as a powerful oppressive force in the lives of black women is articulated in Jillian’s description of her relationship with her white co-workers. She states,

They’ll say, “Why are you always angry?” And I’ll always say,

I’m not angry. I have a point and if I have a point that I want to be taken seriously I have to make sure that I stress my point, because I’ve worked with so many people for so many years, that if I don’t stress, what I need, or what I’m looking for, it will never ever be raised, so I always tend to be louder than everyone else.<sup>25</sup>

Jillian’s co-workers placed her into the category of the “angry black woman.” They did not recognize the images that surround them in the greater society as crooked, and thus accepted reflections of black women as “loud, argumentative, irrationally angry, and verbally abusive” as fact.<sup>26</sup> As similar to other black women, Jillian’s experiences with discrimination and underestimation have made an assertive attitude a necessary tool of survival. Yet, instead of empowering her, her assertiveness has functioned to reinforce her marginalization.

As argued in the conclusions of the 1965 Moynihan Report, there are crooked images specific to black motherhood. Black immigrant mothers undoubtedly experience the stigmatization that results from prevailing and unchallenged assumptions of black mothers as irresponsible. Forty-four year old Sierra Leonean immigrant Lina, mother of a 9 year old son, who was born in the United States, and a 16 year old daughter born in Sierra Leone, was anxious during her years on welfare assistance in the late 1990s.

---

<sup>23</sup> Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 2011), 29.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Jillian, Interview, 3/12/2013

<sup>26</sup> Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 86.

We had the, you know...the state help, the EBT card, food stamps. You know how you go into the stores; sometimes you would see the expression on people's face...now here you are lazy bone, feeding on the state. Once, I started earning my own, and just being independent of the state it was the most satisfying feeling for me. It was really full and complete, because now I can take care of myself...now I can take care of my kid.<sup>27</sup>

Lina demonstrates a fear of being considered a “welfare queen,” a predominant representation of black mothers as “unrelenting cheats who unfairly demand assistance from the system.”<sup>28</sup> In her reflection, welfare emerges as a source of public shame and an indicator of poor, ineffective motherhood. This distinct shaming of black motherhood is also experienced by Jacqui. Although she is divorced, she states that people assume that she was never married. Due to her positioning as a black mother, it is assumed that she is single and reproduces irresponsibly.

The process of becoming race conscious and adapting to the foreign, racialized society is pressing for black mothers because they have to be able to teach their children how to tilt the crooked images in an upright position. As Jacqui states, “when you become a mother, you recognize that there is a certain racism that your child will encounter, so how do you build their confidence and prepare them for that part of the world.”<sup>29</sup> The predominant literature suggests that in preparing their children for the discriminatory world, the socialization techniques of black immigrant parents departs from that of their native born counterparts. West Indian immigrants for example, according to Philip Kasinitz et al. in *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*, are “wary of imposing a “minority” consciousness on their children...they feel that African Americans have been hurt by awareness of their stigmatized status.”<sup>30</sup> Mary C. Waters’ research on West Indian immigrants in New York City suggests that from the West Indian perspective, “hurt” is not defined by physical impairment, but mental decapitation. It is suggested that West Indians believe that the racial consciousness of native born black families has led to a mental decapitation, in which they produce and reproduce self-

---

<sup>27</sup> Lina, Interview, 3/12/2013

<sup>28</sup> Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> Jacqueline, Interview, 3/18/2013

<sup>30</sup> Philip Kasinitz, John H. Mollenkopf, Mary C. Water, and Jennifer Holdaway, *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 305.

victimization and the idea that race is an impenetrable obstacle.<sup>31</sup> Thus, while they seek to equip their children with the psychological defense mechanisms necessary to dealing with acts of racism, they do not want their children to be “hurt,” disillusioned and unable to see “doors of opportunity” opened by those who are not racist.<sup>32</sup>

However, the process by which immigrant parents socialize their children to adapt in a racialized society is not as isolated from that of their native black counterparts as existing studies suggest. Native born black mothers are active participants in the conscious raising of the children of foreign born mothers. Black immigrant mothers initiate and embrace a collective, boundary-less form of black mothering. Respondent, Jillian states that she was a “drifter” upon first arriving to the United States.<sup>33</sup> “I drifted many years as a loner than accepting the culture as it is, I refused to change.”<sup>34</sup> After having children however, she knew that adjustment was necessary in order to effectively socialize her children. When embarking on this journey of motherhood, she did not set out to separate her methods from those of native born black mothers, but rather sought out this community. She discloses, “I would search for individuals that had children to kind of link with them and see how you do as a parent, a black parent, raise your kid in this atmosphere.”<sup>35</sup> Jillian found these individuals at her youngest child’s first school, a predominantly African American institution. She continues by stating, “That’s when I thought I found a family.”<sup>36</sup> In Jillian’s account, the mothering of African Americans emerges as a source of guidance, as opposed to a point of departure. Her relationship with native black mothers marked her immersion into American society and a start to the acculturation of her American born children.

A more direct form of interethnic influence is unmistakable in Jacqui’s attempts to guide her sons in the navigation of their racial identities. Jacqui was raised in a Ghanaian home where race was rarely discussed. Moreover, her parents are of an upper-class socio-economic status, which functioned to further displace discrimination as a valuable topic of discussion. Thus, in order to strengthen her ability to effectively teach and

---

<sup>31</sup> Mary C. Waters, *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 186.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>33</sup> Jillian, Interview, 3/12/2013

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*

inform her children, Jacqui drew upon the insight of African American mothers. She actively crosses into what the predominant scholarship suggests is to black immigrants, an “oppositional” form of parenting.<sup>37</sup> In one instance she called upon her friend Angela, a native born black mother, to inform one of her sons on how to respond to questions about his racial identity. The friend tells the son, “Make sure that when they ask you what race you are, tell them that you’re green, tell them you have money.”<sup>38</sup> Although Jacqui questioned the extent to which this advice would yield positive results, her decision to foster dialogue between her son and Angela suggests that she recognizes her friend’s capacity to mother, draw meaning from her experiences and transmit valuable knowledge.

The initiation of border crossing is not limited to foreign-born black mothers. African American mothers demonstrate commitment to instilling racial consciousness in the children of black immigrants. This is noted for example in the experiences of 32 year old native black mother of two, Jennifer. She states that her relations with black immigrant mothers stems from her interest in their children. For example, Jen has formed a strong connection with the young daughter of her Somalia born co-worker. In discussing her relationship with the child she states,

We had a little back and forth where her daughter took a long time to connect with me...but when white women walk her baby would run up to them...she doesn’t see me as one of the woman who are safe in her mind and her heart...but you can have total strangers who are white folk – and it’s like, wait a minute...it took her awhile to smile back and accept me in her place.<sup>39</sup>

Jen sought to disrupt the daughter’s internalization of color prejudice and racialized stereotypes. She assumed responsibility in the child’s development of a racial conscious. Jen recognized that their relationship would be a necessary start to the daughter’s ability to see people of color as secure, safe and a positive reflection of herself.

This integrated, rather than insular process of child socialization is a powerful representation of the centrality of border crossing to the lives of native and foreign born black mothers and that of their children.

---

<sup>37</sup> Suzanne Model, *West Indian Immigrants: A Black Success Story?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 65.

<sup>38</sup> Jacqueline, Interview, 3/18/2013

<sup>39</sup> Jennifer, Interview, 12/5/2012

When black children are slain in racially charged acts, their mothers are harshly reminded of the disposability of black lives in America, and the extent to which their pain is left unacknowledged and their right to justice left unresolved. This degraded status has been Sabrina Fulton's reality since the murder of her 17 year old son, Trayvon Martin. However, akin to Mamie Till, mother of Emmitt Till, and the multitude of mourning black mothers that have come before her, Fulton has resisted the invisibility of black pain. Although contained in a society with deeply entrenched ideologies of black motherhood as deviant, Fulton embodies the antithesis of shameful. While on a public platform in the face of a jury of 6 women, 5 white, that failed to see Trayvon Martin as a child -- their child, she re-claimed his right to innocence. Since her son's murder in January 2012, Fulton has worked tirelessly to challenge potentially unjust laws such as "Stand Your Ground," the ordinance that ultimately contributed to the acquittal of Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman. The practice of ethnic border crossing is central to her efforts. Emblematic of her navigation of the borderlands of ethnic interaction are her collaborations with Doreen Lawrence, a Jamaican immigrant mother from Britain. In April of 1993, Doreen's 18 year old son was, "stabbed to death in a racially motivated attack by a gang of white youths, while awaiting a bus in Eltham, South London."<sup>40</sup> As similar to the Martin case, Stephen's attackers were acquitted. Yet Doreen's steadfast protest and assertion that the police investigation was infiltrated with racial bias, led to the case being re-opened in 2012, and two of the original suspects were "convicted of murder and jailed for up to 15 years."<sup>41</sup> Shortly following Trayvon's murder, Lawrence invited Fulton to London. The two mothers, along with Trayvon's father, Tracy Martin orchestrated a public meeting at the University of London on Mother's Day 2012, in which they educated the audience on the costs of racial profiling.<sup>42</sup> In the midst of the "I am Trayvon Martin" and "No Justice, No Peace" chants, Fulton courageously declared,

Until you have lost a child, it's very difficult for you to understand how we feel, and the hurt and the pain that we have...nobody can bring our children back, but it would bring us comfort if we

---

<sup>40</sup> Palash Ghosh, "Mother of Black Murder Victim Stephen Lawrence Britain's Trayvon Martin, To Become Labour Peer," *International Business Times*, <http://www.ibtimes.com/mother-black-murder-victim-stephen-lawrence-britains-trayvon-martin-become-labour-peer-1366781>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Ian Johnston, "Trayvon Martin's Parents Take Justice Campaign to London," *MSNBC.Com*, <http://justicetm.org/trayvon-martins-parents-take-justice-campaign-to-london/>

can help spare other mothers the pain that we will feel on Mother's Day and every day for the rest of our lives.<sup>43</sup>

The emphasis on Trayvon and Stephen as “our children,” and hurt and pain as a part of “our lives” reveals loss and tragedy as characteristics that Fulton and Lawrence share. However, more than this, Fulton's speech illuminates that interethnic interaction allowed these mothers to build upon, and give meaning to their shared pain. Border crossing allowed them to validate one another's experiences, and unite their families to ignite systemic change. They pooled together their affiliations and institutions, such as “Million Hoodies” and “Occupy London,” to communicate a message that would remove the targets on the bodies of black men and other minorities.

According to the “minority group theoretical perspective,” the relationship formed between Sabryna Fulton and Doreen Lawrence was imminent. This perspective suggests that the formation of intra-racial coalitions for social, political and economic advancement is inevitable among native and foreign born blacks.<sup>44</sup> It asserts that as “as non-White newcomers meet racial barriers such as the ones African-Americans have encountered, the probability of their making political common cause with their native-born Black counterparts will increase.”<sup>45</sup> In “Race-Based Coalitions Among Minority Groups: Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and African-Americans in New York City,” Reuel Rogers interrogates and challenges the appliance of the “linked racial fate” concept to native and foreign-born blacks. His research suggests that the expectation that “race will override the differences between African-Americans and the new immigrants and encourage them to forge political alliances” does not hold. Rogers' research on New York City's elite politicians revealed the lack of stable coalitions among black immigrants and native born blacks, and he suggested that the cause of this is the absence of an “institutional mechanism.”<sup>46</sup> He states, “Viable institutions provide a framework for groups to

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Reuel R. Rogers, “Race-Based Coalitions Among Minority Groups: Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and African-Americans in New York City,” *Urban Affairs Review* 39, no. 283 (2004): 287.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 309.

engage in social learning, that is, articulate shared interests, acknowledge distinct ones, reinforce ideological commitments, solidify personal ties, and identify promising leaders.”<sup>47</sup>

Native and foreign born black mothers have responded to this call for the creation of institutions capable of fostering interethnic mobilization. They actively cross ethnic boundaries and craft alternative vehicles and systems that allow them to conduct the critical work of negotiating their differences and organizing around issues that affect their children and families. In Hartford, the grass-roots organizations, Single Mothers on the Move and AFCAMP (African Caribbean American Parents of Children with Disabilities, Inc.) are manifestations of effective minority coalition building among native and foreign born black mothers.

On February 14, 2005, a small group of women gathered around the entrance of Connecticut’s capital building. As legislators, congressman and commissioners exited the building the women gave them each a small, heart-shaped box. However, upon opening the signature Valentine’s Day boxes, these officials did not find chocolate, but a list containing the financial concerns of single mothers dependent on Temporary Family Assistance (TFA). Sabrina, a 44 year old African American single mother, was among this group of women.

“Project Valentine’s Day” was one of Single Mothers on the Move’s first mobilization efforts. Months prior, Sabrina, and other single mothers receiving State and Federal assistance gathered to establish the organization. Phone calls to their social workers, which were typically left unanswered or sent straight to voice-mail, failed to augment TFA reform and target the inefficiencies of the Department for Social Services.<sup>48</sup> Thus, as the existing institutions failed to legitimize and regard the voices and concerns of single mothers and regard the livelihoods of their children, these women decided to craft an alternative institution. They refused to accept their powerlessness and actively crafted a space of empowerment. In this institution, the realities of their experiences were valued, they investigated the roots of their concerns, claimed knowledge of the inner-workings of TFA that they were originally deprived of and most importantly, located strength in numbers in the face of a social structure that casts them against one another as enemies, vying for the same finite resources.

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>48</sup> Andy Hart, "Single Mothers on the Move to Meet with DSS Chief," *HartfordInfo.Org: Hartford News*, June 19, 2008, [http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/familiesandchildren/htfd\\_news\\_061908.asp](http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/familiesandchildren/htfd_news_061908.asp)

Through protests, alliances formed with the organization, Community Party, and meetings with the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services, as well as the African American and Latino Legislative Caucuses, these single mothers are working on tackling the financial instability of Section 8 and the Rental Assistance Program, funding for public schools and the poor application process for free child care services.<sup>49</sup> Sabrina declared with pride that they played a central role in the State's decision to increase the welfare time limit from 12 months to 21 months.<sup>50</sup>

The extent to which Single Mothers on the Move (SMOM), signifies a strong alliance between native and foreign born blacks, is noted in its recognition and accommodation of the different needs and values of the varying ethnic groups involved. Rogers argues that an institutional framework is necessary for the fruition of stable cross-ethnic coalitions because serves as a forum for dialogue. In the absence of dialogue, "self-preservation" and "trumps any vision for race-based mobilization and coalition building" are not possible.<sup>51</sup> An open discussion of similar, as well as different interests among the groups has prevented the development of an agenda that primarily focuses on the prerogatives of one ethnic group.<sup>52</sup> The presence of dialogue and an inclusive agenda for the rights of single mothers on government assistance is evident in SMOM's campaign and recruitment strategies. Sabrina states that there are very few African immigrant mothers involved with the coalition. In discussing the reasoning for this, she comments, "African moms...they're really scared of their husbands and ex-husbands. They are really scared of their ex-spouses...one African mom, she was kind of scared to get involved with single mothers on the move stuff, she was married and she didn't want her ex-husband to find out."<sup>53</sup> Although Sabrina's conception that single African immigrant mothers fear their husbands does not stand to be true for the whole population, her thoughts make clear that SMOM is an alternative institution that allows for uninhibited dialogue and the construction of a safe-space across ethnic

---

<sup>49</sup> Andy Hart, "Single Mothers Speak Out: Grassroots Group Demands Long-Awaited Cost of Living Increase in State Assistance," HartfordInfo.Org: Hartford News, February 21, 2007,

[http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/FamiliesandChildren/htfd\\_news\\_022107.asp](http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/FamiliesandChildren/htfd_news_022107.asp)

<sup>50</sup> CTLawHelp.Org, "Temporary Family Assistance Program (TFA)," December 2009, <http://ctlawhelp.org/temporary-family-assistance-program-tfa#gettingassistance>.

<sup>51</sup> Rogers, "Race Based Coalitions Among Minority Groups," 303.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>53</sup> Sabrina, Interview, 4/10/2013

boundaries. Single Mothers on the Move has taken this patterned gender dynamic among African immigrants into account in structuring their recruitment strategies. Sabrina is interested in having more African immigrant single mothers join them in the trenches, thus when she recruited for SMOM by passing out flyers or knocking door to door, she attempted to emphasize that the organization is not threatening to one's livelihood, and is a positive movement. Sabrina also mentions that they have different committees, such as for housing and youth development. These smaller groups allow its members to act in different capacities.<sup>54</sup>

SMOM's conception of literacy as multi-dimensional is also telling of its displacement of minimal productivity and self-preservation. Sabrina shares that she, as well as the other single mothers have a literacy issue and it has contributed to their inability to locate work and effectively help their children with homework.

That's another problem in Hartford, it just pushes people through the system and that's another reason why people can't get jobs. Because they're being pushed through the system, and they've been beaten down so badly, no one wants to tackle that issue, this is why our kids can't read or write, so the cycle continues. Nobody does anything about it, and it's going to be on going and it's not fair.<sup>55</sup>

In this reflection, Sabrina undoubtedly sheds light on one of the many ways in which the life opportunities of low income families are severely limited. SMOM identifies illiteracy as another area in need of improvement within the institution of social services. Their conception of literacy, however, extends far beyond the ability to read and write. The African American mothers of the group deem it critically important that they help their black immigrant counterparts become well versed in the contours of the nation's legal and welfare system. Sabrina cites multiple instances in which she accompanies mothers when they are to sign and fill out paper work for their children at school. She emphasizes, "If some of our kids are struggling in school and I tell them [the other mothers] that they don't have to sign anything, if they need a lawyer, if they don't like how they're being treated in the school system."<sup>56</sup>

Although collective activism among black mothers on the borderlands of cross-ethnic interaction is strengthened by class ties, as noted in SMOM, the formation of these coalitions and institutions of

---

<sup>54</sup> Sabrina, Interview, 4/10/2013

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

empowerment are not solely dependent on this foundation. The possibility of this is apparent in the “parent driven nonprofit organization,” African Caribbean American Parents of Children with Disabilities, Incorporated, also known as AFCAMP.<sup>57</sup> The organization was created by a social worker and Jamaican immigrant mother, Merva Jackson in 1999 and is still in existence today. Jackson and other parents involved in AFCAMP’s establishment “recognized the profound need for training, education, support, services and advocacy for Hartford families of color caring for children with mental, physical and psychological disabilities.”<sup>58</sup> With funding provided by donations and federal and state agencies, these parent advocates offer peer support and training to Hartford families, as well as assist them in seeking culturally competent resources and services for their children’s disability needs.<sup>59</sup> Native and foreign born black mothers are at the vanguard of this organization and are the most represented among the people the program services. As both racialized and disabled bodies, the children of AFCAMP mothers are dually oppressed, victimized and underestimated. These native and foreign born black mothers rely on one another to empower themselves, so that they can empower their children. SMOM and AFCAMP not only demonstrate the ability of native and foreign born black mothers to embark on interethnic coalitions, but also an essential component of their attempts to become active agents and contributors to the national debate on major social and political issues.

### *Conclusion*

The patterns that emerge from the Hartford landscape provide a model against which standard notions of corrupt black interethnic relations can be re-evaluated. It points to simplified and one-dimensional conceptions of black motherhood as a hindrance to complex understanding of the black diasporas in America. This study interjects intersectionality, and the inter-play of race, ethnicity, class and gender based identities as a valuable framework. In “Conflict or Cooperation? Africans and African Americans in Multiracial America,” Akwasi Assensoh characterizes the relationship between native blacks and their “African-born kith and kin” as a “pendulum that swings from conflict to cooperation depending on the time, histopolitical and economic context,

---

<sup>57</sup> African Caribbean American Parents of Children With Disabilities, Inc. Information Sheet

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

media images, and cultural norms.”<sup>60</sup> Recognition of intersectionality, and an exploration of the ways in which gender and motherhood shape the lives of native and foreign born black immigrants that goes beyond the reproduction of images of black maternal and familial deviancy, fully captures the forces and conditions that cause the “pendulum” to swing towards the cooperation end of the pivot.

Although this study is circumscribed and focused on a particular population, it provides a roadmap and stimulus for further research. The predominant scholarly interpretations of contemporary native and foreign-born black relations require expansion and the incorporation of additional features. The voices of the Hartford mothers allude to the presence of fluid boundaries and permeable zones of interaction. Native and foreign -born black women, mother across supposed fixed ethnic boundaries, and participate in the socialization of one another’s children, build stable coalitions and exchange critical child rearing practices and values. While crossing, shifting and blurring borders, they redefine the components of black motherhood and black identity in America, as well as resist their relegation to the margins. To overlook this dynamic process, is to stifle and silence the complex functioning of ethnicity in 21<sup>st</sup> century multi-cultural society.

### **Works Cited**

Abdullah, Zain. *Black Mecca*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Arthur, John A. *Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2000.

---

<sup>60</sup> Akwasi Assensoh, “Conflict or Cooperation? Africans and African Americans in Multiracial America,” in *Black and Multiracial Politics in America*, eds. Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh and Lawrence Hanks (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 114.

Assensoh, Akwasi "Conflict or Cooperation? Africans and African Americans in Multiracial America," in *Black and Multiracial Politics in America*, eds. Yvette M. Alex-Assensoh and Lawrence Hanks, New York and London: New York University Press, 2000.

Burton, Nsenga. "72 Percent of African American Children Born to Unwed Mothers." *The Root*. November 9, 2010. <http://www.theroot.com/buzz/72-percent-african-american-children-born-unwed-mothers>

Dolnick, Sam. "For African Immigrants, Bronx Culture Clash Turns Violent." *The New York Times*, N.Y./Region, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/nyregion/20africans.html?\\_r=2&ref=nyregion&](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/20/nyregion/20africans.html?_r=2&ref=nyregion&)

Du Bois, Christine M. *Images of West Indian Immigrants in Mass Media: The Struggle for a Positive Ethnic Representation*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC 2004.

Foner, Nancy. *Islands in the City: West Indian Migration to New York*. Ewing: University of California Press 2001.

Palash Ghosh, "Mother of Black Murder Victim Stephen Lawrence Britain's Trayvon Martin, To Become Labour Peer," *International Business Times*, <http://www.ibtimes.com/mother-black-murder-victim-stephen-lawrence-britains-trayvon-martin-become-labour-peer-1366781>

Harris-Perry, Melissa. *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press 2011.

Hart, Andy. "Single Mothers on the Move to Meet with DSS Chief." *HartfordInfo.Org: Hartford News*. June 19, 2008. [http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/familiesandchildren/htfd\\_news\\_061908.asp](http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/familiesandchildren/htfd_news_061908.asp)

Hart, Andy. "Single Mothers Speak Out: Grassroots Group Demands Long-Awaited Cost of Living Increase in State Assistance." *HartfordInfo.Org: Hartford News*. February 21, 2007, [http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/FamiliesandChildren/htfd\\_news\\_022107.asp](http://www.hartfordinfo.org/issues/documents/FamiliesandChildren/htfd_news_022107.asp)

hooks, bell. *Sisters of the Yam*. Boston: South End Press Collective, 1993.

Johnson, Violet Showers. *The Other Black Bostonians: West Indians in Boston 1900-1950*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

Ian Johnston, "Trayvon Martin's Parents Take Justice Campaign to London," *MSNBC.Com*, <http://justicetm.org/trayvon-martins-parents-take-justice-campaign-to-london/>

Kasinitz, Philip, John H. Mollenkopf, Mary C. Water, and Jennifer Holdaway. *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008.

Model, Suzanne. *West Indian Immigrants: A Black Success Story?* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008.

Robinson, Eugene. *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America*. New York: Random House, 2010.

Rogers, Reuel R. "Race-Based Coalitions Among Minority Groups: Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and African-Americans in New York City." *Urban Affairs Review* 39, no. 283 (2004): 283-317.

Shaw-Taylor, Yoku, and Steven Tuch. *The Other African Americans*. United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. , 2007.

Táiwò, Olúfèmi, "This Prison Called My Skin: On Being Black in America," in *Problematizing Blackness: Self-Ethnographies by Black Immigrants to the United States*, eds. Percy C. Hintzen and Jean Muteba Rahier, New York: Routledge, 2003.

Vickerman, Milton. *Crosscurrents: West Indian Immigrants and Race*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Walton, Eugene. "African Immigrants Want No Community with African Americans Says New Book." May 2012. *Lee Bailey's EurWeb.Com Electronic Urban Report*. <http://www.eurweb.com/2012/05/african-immigrants-want-no-community-with-african-americans-explains-new-book/>

Waters, Mary C. *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999.

Watkins-Owens, Irma. *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Young, Ward. "Culture Conflict Caribbean Roots Tangle with African Americans in the US. *YardieNews.Com*. February 16, 2010. <http://yardienews.com/culture-conflict-caribbean-roots-tangle-with-african-american-in-u-s/>

• Channon S. Miller, Boston University, "Mothering Across Fragmented Borders of Blackness: Cross-Ethnic Ties among African Immigrant, Caribbean Immigrant and African American Mothers"  
• Alissa Nicole Butler, UMass Boston, "Post Racial? Psych!: Assimilation and Racial Subjugation in USA's Top Comedy"  
• James Simons, UMass Boston, "Represent: White Racial Performance in Today's Hip-Hop"  
representations of Nativeness. chair: • Michael Millner, UMass Lowell, "Culture and Casinos: The Wampanoag, Plimoth Plantation, and the Casino Bid"