Introduction

The Newest African Americans?

There is a new breed of internationally mobile, young people of African descent making their mark on the world. They are neither Africans nor Americans or Europeans for that matter but children of many worlds, Afropolitans they are.
—Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu, “I Am an Afropolitan”

In her memoir, My Heart Will Cross This Ocean, Kadiatou Diallo, mother of Amadou Diallo, the unarmed immigrant from Guinea who in 1999 was killed by four New York City police officers, discusses her response to how her son was described in the media:

None of this hurt me as much as unarmed West African street vendor. This label stole his story. To call him West African revealed nothing. He had lived in three different West African countries, in five different towns or cities in Africa, with subtleties that made each one distinct. He lived in two different cities in Asia, had studied in the best schools in these places, and had been part of a neighborhood in New York for nearly two and a half years, selling, buying, eating, rooting for teams, kicking a ball in the playgrounds, going to the movies. Didn’t that give him even the slightest claim to being not just a West African but a New Yorker too?

Kadiatou Diallo’s lament speaks directly to the central aims of this study, a project that probes such questions as these: Just who was Amadou Diallo? What is the meaning of West African identity, and what are the claims of West African newcomers to the United States? Will these overwhelmingly nonwhite African migrants who come from such wide-ranging cultural backgrounds ever become New Yorkers?
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or Texans or Minnesotans, too? In short, will they become the newest African Americans? Bridging the fields of immigration, ethnic, and African American studies, this volume explores issues of cultural identity formation and socioeconomic incorporation among immigrants and refugees from West Africa during the past forty years.

The recent influx of West Africans to the United States is part of a much wider postcolonial phenomenon, evident in a modern-day dispersal of sub-Saharan Africans within and outside the continent. Consequently, a vibrant new African diaspora has been unfolding in diverse ways, and the United States has been pivotal to this development. As scholars have remarked about the African diaspora in general, it is characterized by heterogeneity and hybridity. Change, transformation, or, as Paul Gilroy describes it in his seminal work, *The Black Atlantic, “transfiguration” underscores the diasporic experience, even as the participants struggle to transplant their pasts and “repeat the unrepeatable.” The term “West African” connotes a pan-ethnic conglomerate with color as well as some aspects of shared regional and historical

experience in common. The nations included under this rubric—Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo (Saint Helena, a British overseas territory in the southern Atlantic, is also included on some lists of countries in West Africa)—represent the legacy of colonial intervention that coerced peoples of a wide variety of traditions, cultures, languages, religions, and worldviews who otherwise would not have necessarily grouped themselves in this way. Nonetheless, since this was the part of Africa where much of the transatlantic slave trade was conducted, the region signifies a cultural geography that represents continuity between long-standing African Americans who are the descendants of slavery in the United States and the newest arrivals from the continent. The linkage stretches back to well before the nation was formed. Though brought to the New World in chains, Africans were among the first Americans, while today they constitute a notable segment of the country’s most recent settlers.

Indeed, the ancestors of most black Americans today would most certainly be linked back to the areas of the continent that constitute the nations of West Africa since the majority of those who were forced into slavery and who ended up on America’s shores from the colonial period
right down to the abolition of the slave trade in the United States were captured out of West Africa. For example, throughout the eighteenth century, among the slaves who were brought to toil in the Chesapeake, the proportion of Igbo peoples, a population that originated from the area that later became Nigeria, was so high that some scholars have begun to refer to colonial Virginia as “Igbo Land.” Thus, the region of the continent of Africa that was so crucial to the initial making of the Atlantic World during these many decades past is continuing to play a significant role in refashioning the contemporary black Atlantic through the establishment of new West African immigrant communities.

The increased presence of African newcomers to the United States has prompted native-born blacks to become much more aware of the specificities of African ethnicities through increased contact with their continental counterparts. A related factor in the shifting dynamics of this newest iteration of the global black Atlantic has been the craze to trace and discover one’s origins via the advanced technologies that DNA testing now makes possible. As the Nigerian-born NBC television correspondent, Michael Okwu, put it in the opening line of a 2005 feature on the Today show about the Genographic Project, a collaboration between National Geographic and IBM to collect DNA samples, “The search for our ancestors is a national pastime—the second most popular hobby after gardening.” In the meantime, taking advantage of these new sequencing methods and an ever-expanding database, flawed as these investigative tools have been shown to be, Oprah Winfrey has learned that she is descended from the Kpele people who lived in the Guinea Highlands of what is now central Liberia; the celebrity minister T. D. Jakes was able to track his ancestry to the Igbos of Nigeria, as was Academy Award–winner Forest Whitaker, while Whoopi Goldberg found out that her lineage comes from the Papel and Bayote tribes that clustered in modern-day Guinea-Bissau. Taking it a step further, the actor Isaiah Washington became the first African American to gain Sierra Leonean citizenship based on DNA matches. Ever since, he has dedicated much of his time and donated significant resources to the country he now counts as his homeland, including setting up a village school in southern Sierra Leone. Over and over again, as the ability to determine distinctive ethnicities and pinpoint tribal origins becomes more sophisticated, the native-born African American population
is discovering that the transatlantic ties to their forebears most often weave back to the region of West Africa.

While some with the means and an adventurous outlook do make the trip to West Africa to cultivate their newfound ancestral identities, the majority do not actually physically travel to the continent to pursue such connections. Instead, they rely on the surrogate West African communities already transplanted to this side of the Atlantic to nurture the link. For example, Stella Stinson, whose DNA testing traced her ancestry to the Mendes of Sierra Leone, found in the vibrant Sierra Leonean immigrant community in Atlanta a tangible base from which to learn about, affirm, and project this newly discovered ethnic identity. As if to publicly illustrate this affiliation, in April 2008, when the musical group Sierra Leone Refugee Stars visited Atlanta, she not only joined “other” members of the local Sierra Leonean community at the preformance dinner and backstage events but also proudly held up her DNA Certificate of Heritage in every photograph in which she appeared. The heightened awareness fostered by the increased visibility of West Africans in the neighborhoods, churches, masjids (mosques), schools, and shopping centers of areas where long-standing descendents of slavery also reside in combination with the much publicized discoveries by high-profile celebrities of their antecedents in West Africa that have triggered the more widespread interest in pursuing these potential bonds mark a new phase in the remaking of the Atlantic World.

But it is not just the linkage of the American-born with the West African–born that has been legitimzed. Those who compose the recent Caribbean diaspora in the United States are also pinpointing their roots and ascertaining the role of West Africa in their family histories. And as with their African American neighbors, they, too, alongside the few who decide to participate in organized heritage tours to West Africa itself, have been turning to surrogate West African enclaves in the United States to facilitate and confirm these ancestral connections. Atlanta resident Owen Powell originally from Jamaica, followed up his report of his DNA results with a trip to the Mende villages of Sierra Leone. Upon his return, he was excited to display his pictures with chiefs, elders, and other villagers at a fund-raising event for MUSAC House of Caring, a local Atlanta Sierra Leonean immigrant organization. Like Stinson, this descendant of the historical diaspora was eager
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to share proof of his authentic membership in the American West African collective that represents a share of the new diaspora.

Thus, from West Africa to the West Indies to destinations like metropolitan Atlanta, significant segments of black America are forging new meanings and interpretive frameworks for understanding the paradigm of the Atlantic World. It is this transfiguration in the diversity and complexity of the role of the new West African diaspora in the recent history of the black Atlantic that our study describes, explains, and interrogates. We explore the intricate patterns of adaptation and incorporation among the immigrants and their children, the evolution of new forms of transnational ties with Africa and Europe as well as translocal connections among the numerous enclaves in the United States, and the impact of the recent postcolonial and voluntary immigration of West Africans on the changing meanings of “African Americanness.”

American African or African American?

Because people of African descent typically have not been counted as part of America’s migratory tradition, as a subject of social scientific inquiry, immigration from Africa has thus far lacked a primary academic address. With the exception of the recent burgeoning scholarship on the Caribbean influx, the research on these populations has fallen between the cracks of traditional disciplinary boundaries. The focus in African American studies has been on the coerced migrations of the transatlantic slave trade era or the legacy of that movement, while the historiography of immigration scholarship has concentrated on voluntary migratory flows, first almost exclusively on generations of European settlers and more recently on arrivals from Asia and Latin America to the United States. What keeps being overlooked in this polarized framework is the systematic investigation of the voluntary African immigrant experience. As the editors of a collection of black immigrant self-ethnographies, Percy Claude Hintzen and Jean Muteba Rahier, point out in their introduction to the volume, even when black diversity has been the very subject of treatments of representations of blackness in the United States, as was the case with two well-regarded documentaries, Marlon Riggs’s *Black Is . . . Black Ain’t* (1994) and Henry Louis Gates’s *Two Nations of Black America* (1998), foreign-born blacks were never mentioned and remained outside their purview.6
In 2005, however, in a truly redefining moment that has contributed to finally shifting this disciplinary divide, New York’s distinguished Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture launched a groundbreaking new exhibition, “In Motion: The African American Migration Experience,” an initiative that represented a major reconceptualization of African American history by putting migration at the very heart of the narrative. In addition to a comprehensive tracing of the transatlantic slave trade, the project documents the great migrations, the Caribbean and Haitian flows, as well as voluntary African immigration. And it could not have been more timely since in just the past four decades, more Africans have come to the United States of their own volition than were forcibly brought in bondage to the shores of the Americas during the more than three centuries of international commerce in human slavery subsequent to European contact. Indeed, if the authors of the recent sweeping history of global migration Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future and other demographers are correct in their predictions, Africa will supply the next big wave of immigrants, outpacing even those from East Asia. In the near future, as the levels of poverty recede on the African continent, more and more people will be able to obtain the necessary resources to make international migration an option for them. Thus, new and complicated chapters are being added to the African narratives of migration, an arc that had been dominated by the bitter history of slavery and later the internal migrations from the rural south to the industrial centers of the midwestern United States; yet these subsequent episodes represent equally compelling stories in the unfolding of a dynamic new African diaspora.

Prior to the late 1970s, with few exceptions, not only was immigration scholarship synonymous with research concerning voluntary arrivals from Europe, but within that framework, European newcomers were assumed to have ethnic identities. Issues of racial identity, however, belonged exclusively to the domain of African American history. Just as immigration scholars overlooked race and the forced migrations of African Americans in the past, African American scholars concentrating on the slave trade, in turn, ignored immigration; somehow the migration experience and the scholarship related to it were not considered to be a part of the relocations of slavery. Thus, immigration history
and African American history followed two separate trajectories, with ethnicity the province of immigration studies and race the subject of African American history. This was a black and white world, where Asians, Latinos, and Caribbeans rarely appeared on the scholarly radar. Furthermore, on both sides of this gulf, questions of identity itself were peripheral. Among immigration historians, ethnicity figured much more prominently within discussions of assimilation or nativism than in analysis of distinctive cultural practices and the performance of ethnic identities, while scholars of African America were preoccupied with the subjects of slavery, segregation, and discrimination, not the nuances of race and culture, topics that did not begin to receive serious attention until the late 1980s.

While enhancing our knowledge of the African-born population carries undeniable value, understanding the experience of this little-known slice of contemporary American society takes us yet another step further as it unsettles accepted narratives of black identity and the meaning of race in the United States. Most recently, Eugene Robinson, the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist for the Washington Post, named this challenge to received ideas about race Disintegration, the title of his 2010 book on the fragmentation of black America. Key to his analysis is the significance of “the stunning increase in the flow of immigrants from the African continent,” a population he is quick to point out ranks as “the best-educated immigrant group in America, with more advanced degrees than the Asians, the Europeans, you name it.” Robinson argues convincingly that along with the influx of Caribbean newcomers and increasing numbers of those with mixed-raced ancestry, new Africans constitute a key “emergent” cohort in the development of dramatic, contemporary redefinitions of blackness in the United States.

Such a repositioning was exemplified when, in the spring of 2011, President Barack Obama made his first trip back to Harlem since being elected to the White House to hold a fund-raiser in this historic black neighborhood. But rather than hosting the dinner at the usual venue for such occasions, the well-known Sylvia’s, where Sylvia Woods, dubbed the “Queen of Soul Food,” had famously welcomed dignitaries from Bill Clinton to Nelson Mandela, the president held the event at a new neighborhood restaurant, The Red Rooster, opened a few months earlier by celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson. President Obama’s choice
was noteworthy, signifying the diversity of the new African America, since although Samuelsson now calls Harlem his home, he is African-born and is the author of *The Soul of a New Cuisine: The Discovery of the Foods and Flavors of Africa*.

Susan Greenbaum acknowledges that she is oversimplifying, but the research that she conducted covering over a century of Afro-Cuban presence in Tampa, Florida, led her to sum up the difference in the concepts of race and ethnicity in this way: “Race is a uniform you wear, and ethnicity is a team on which you play. We all have both race and ethnicity, a color-coded phenotypic identity and membership in some historically defined natal community.” However, the vast majority of West African immigrants feel that while they are compelled to wear a uniform, nobody recognizes the team they represent. In his self-ethnography, Nigerian novelist Olúfémi Táíwò coined the term “newly-minted blacks” to refer to immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean who discover the salience—and the chokehold—of blackness only upon settlement in the United States. Of his own experience, he poignantly explains,

All my life in Nigeria, I lived as a Yorùbá, a Nigerian, an African, and human being. I occupied, by turns, several different roles. I was a hugely successful Boy Scout. I was a well-read African cultural nationalist. I was a member of the Nigerian province of the worldwide communion of the Church of England. . . . I was a student leader of national repute . . . an aspiring revolutionary . . . a frustrated journalist who, to his eternal regret, could not resist the call of the teaching profession. . . . I was an ardent football player of limited talent. . . . I was a budding spiritualist. . . . Meanwhile, each one of these roles that I filled at those times was itself a complex of associations, expectations, and responsibility, which all together made for a complex, rich, multidimensional and, I dare say, very human life.

As soon as I arrived in the United States of America [in 1990], I underwent a singular transformation, the consequences of which have circumscribed my life ever since: I BECAME BLACK! . . . The difference is that as soon as I entered the United States, my otherwise complex, multidimensional, and rich human identity became completely reduced to a simple, one-dimensional, and impoverished nonhuman identity. I am saying, in
other words, that to become “black” in the United States is to enter a sphere where there is no differentiation, no distinction, and no variation. It is one under which you are meant to live one way and one way only, regardless of what choices you wish to make.\footnote{11}

Similarly, acclaimed Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who migrated to the United States in 1996 at age nineteen, recalls how she felt about becoming newly minted:

I was annoyed the first time an African American man called me “sister.” It was in a Brooklyn store, and I had recently arrived from Nigeria, a country where, thanks to the mosquitoes that kept British colonizers from settling, my skin color did not determine my identity, did not limit my dreams or my confidence. And so, although I grew up reading books about the baffling places where black people were treated badly for being black, race remained an exotic abstraction: It was Kunta Kinte.

Until that day in Brooklyn. To be called “sister” was to be black, and blackness was the very bottom of America’s pecking order.\footnote{12}

Many years later, Adichie revisited these confounding dynamics in her novel of the Nigerian diaspora, \textit{Americanah}. The central female character, Ifemele, had immigrated to the United States from Nigeria as a young adult and becomes so utterly disturbed by the convoluted racialized environment that she starts to identify herself with a new category, as “Non-American Black,” posting a popular blog where she airs provocative rants on the subject, including this admonition: “Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t ‘black’ in your country. You’re in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the Society of Former Negroes.”\footnote{13}

Even though the great majority (83 percent) of West Africans in the United States racially self-identify as black Africans, that does not automatically or necessarily translate into identifying as African American.\footnote{14} Yet, blackness remains a fundamental factor in shaping their immigrant experience. In spite of the well dokumented ethnic conflicts in the region, West Africans, coming from societies with diverse populations,
already possess certain multicultural competencies. The question is whether these are the right skills for the distinct permutations of American pluralism. Since race and color hold little relevance at home, many of the newcomers, even the most educated, arrive without a clear grasp of the workings of racism and the black experience in the United States.

The overarching focus on native-born African Americans and its resultant eclipse of the new African diaspora have wide-ranging implications and place unnecessary limitations on interpretations of many facets of American society. As the organizers of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration, a group of African Americans and black immigrants in Oakland, California, who came together in 2006 to advocate for immigrant rights, framed it,

Even with the clear evidence of African restaurants, arts and crafts shops and hair braiders that spring up nearly every month, Africans as a community remain invisible and not integrated into the traditional black institutions, churches, schools and political organizations. When the word “immigrant” is used among all communities, the one image that is least considered is a black face of an African immigrant.15

Thus, because of these entrenched suppositions, African immigrant religious communities, for example, typically go unseen in mainstream American life. As Jacob Olupona, the leading scholar in this fledgling academic field, has pointed out, when these groups are recognized, they are incorrectly considered to fall under studies of the “black church.” Yet, this is a label that specifically refers to African American Christian communities, leaving no room for inquiry into the religious experiences of immigrant blacks, including those from Africa; nor does it acknowledge the role of foreign-born religious leaders in establishing particular African immigrant congregations.16 Similarly, the historiography of black politics has been hampered by a narrow assumption of homogeneity among black political constituencies. The variegated forms of socialization and divergent associational networks exhibited by African immigrants have led political scientist Yvette Alex-Assensoh to argue for a newly emergent twenty-first-century black ethnic politics that challenges received ideas about unified black political behavior in America. As recent African immigrants bring more transnational,
heterogeneous, and contested perspectives to racial politics in the United States, the prevailing analysis of a uniform black political positioning historically so intrinsic to the scholarship has become outmoded, insufficient to explain the intricacies of current ethnoracial patterns.\textsuperscript{17}

It remains to be seen just how pliable notions of African American identity structures and their attendant cultural signifiers will be with regard to incorporation of the contributions of the new African diaspora. If African immigrants truly become African American, in the words of African Studies scholar Msia Kibona Clark, “does it mean that room will be made on soul food menus for fufu [West African] and ugali [East African],”—signature African dishes?\textsuperscript{18} Yet another leading Africanist, Ali Mazrui, has suggested turning the category “African American” on its head to better reflect the postcolonial diaspora and instead referring to them as “American African.”\textsuperscript{19}

Thus, in the realms of religion, politics, and culture, as well as other crucial arenas of socioeconomic life, though still largely invisible to the wider society, the new African diaspora, from coast to coast, joins the mass migrations of people from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean who are radically reshaping contemporary America. Along with this far-reaching transformation, the false dichotomy between immigrants and racial minorities has been upended. Inclusion of the booming multiracial population of recent years, both immigrant and second generation, further confounds questions of racial and ethnic identity, mandating not only fresh perspectives on contemporary demographics but also a reexamination of how these populations were categorized, classified, and labeled in the past. Indeed, this volume finally brings the experience of those of recent African ancestry from the periphery to the center of current debates in the field of immigration studies, especially regarding issues of cultural and economic adaptation in a global and transnational context.

The New West African Diaspora

What is this West Africa? Geographically in the west of the continent, it is made up of modern nations that emerged from centuries of European imperial intervention. Zain Abdullah divides West African
immigration to the United States into three stages: the first is the period of the transatlantic slave trade spanning the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries; the second begins in 1808 when the Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves first took effect and continues until passage of the Hart-Celler Bill in 1965, liberalizing immigration policy in the United States; and the last phase, still ongoing, is the post-1965 era. The bulk of West African newcomers, having migrated from the former colonies of Britain, are English-speaking. Smaller numbers hail from Francophone Africa, while those from the Republic of Cape Verde speak Portuguese. With very few exceptions, the new Americans arriving from West Africa are black. Not since the era of the forced migration of half a million Africans in the slave trade have so many newcomers from the region settled in the United States. However, this time, rather than being coerced, they are migrating of their own volition, although it should be acknowledged that characterizing this flow as “voluntary” can be problematic. Increasingly, scholars from various disciplines are insisting that the movement of various African groups as a result of war, political instability, natural disaster, and extreme poverty should be considered as akin to forced migration. Nonetheless, while West Africans of the first diaspora were captured and brought to American shores in chains, in recent years the reverse has been the case, as a considerable number of the latest influx entered as refugees seeking a path to freedom.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, initially pulled by the labor needs of the American whaling industry, immigrants from the Cape Verde Islands left their drought-stricken archipelago located off the west coast of Senegal, islands that had long been colonized by Portugal, to make southeastern New England their new home. These Afro-Portuguese settlers are particularly noteworthy as they represent the first voluntary mass migration from Africa to the United States in American history. The Cape Verdeans are still making the transatlantic journey, but especially over the past four decades they have been accompanied by a broad range of newcomers of diverse ethnic and national origins from the other major West African sending countries of Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Senegal, as well as smaller numbers of arrivals hailing from the other countries of the region. Taken together this movement represents a kaleidoscopic variety of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups that are transforming the ethnoracial landscape of American society.
Overall African immigration has grown dramatically in recent years. By 2007 one of every three black immigrants hailed from the continent of Africa.\textsuperscript{21} Between 1960 and 2009, the African foreign-born population in the United States leaped fortyfold, from 35,355, a figure that represented 0.4 percent of all immigrants, to nearly 1.5 million, totaling 3.9 percent of all immigrants, with much of the growth occurring in just the past two decades. Indeed, more than three-quarters of the African foreign-born have arrived since 1990.\textsuperscript{22} In the decade of the 1990s, sub-Saharan Africa became the fastest growing region of origin of all foreign-born residents in the United States, nearly tripling in size, and continues to increase apace today with a nearly 100 percent growth rate during the 2000s. Not even the downturn in the economy that began in late 2007 appears to have slowed down this population.\textsuperscript{23} Although among the cohort of black immigrants taken as a whole those from the Caribbean have consistently outpaced newcomers from Africa, the Caribbean flow has been decreasing in recent years. This trend in combination with the swelling of African arrivals has led some demographers to predict that by 2020, continental Africans will surpass Caribbeans as the largest group of black immigrants in the United States.\textsuperscript{24} Moreover, in contrast to the African sojourners of the pre-1975 period, these more recent arrivals are in the United States for the duration; 75 percent of those interviewed in a national study stated their intention to settle permanently in their new adopted land.\textsuperscript{25}

Of the million and a half foreign-born from continental Africa in the United States today, over a third (36.3 percent) are from the region of West Africa.\textsuperscript{26} Meanwhile, the number of West African newcomers has continued to increase into the second decade of the twenty-first century. Those hailing from Nigeria compose the largest population of West Africans currently living in the United States, followed by arrivals from Ghana, Liberia, Cape Verde, and Sierra Leone.\textsuperscript{27} Data from the 1980 Census forward show that together newcomers from Nigeria and Ghana have dominated the flow, accounting for approximately 65 percent of the population from the region.\textsuperscript{28} As of 2009, African immigrant men overall (53.6 percent) outnumbered women (46.4 percent). However, in three of the West African groups, females exceeded males—among Liberians (53.1 percent female, 46.9 percent male), Sierra
Leoneans (50.6 percent female, 49.4 percent male), and Cape Verdeans (50.2 percent female, 49.8 percent male).\textsuperscript{29}

As for age upon emigration, West Africans mirror the general immigrant population where the most typical newcomers relocate in the decade of their thirties, with an average age of thirty-four years old (although Cape Verdeans average about five years older than the other West African populations).\textsuperscript{30} According to the 2000 U.S. census, for the first time in census history, immigrant children were the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population, and furthermore, currently one out of five children in the United States is the offspring of an immigrant. Africans are no exception to this trend. In 2005, the population of children with at least one parent who was born in Africa reached approximately four hundred thousand.\textsuperscript{31} Not surprisingly, given the extent of the war-related deaths, political chaos, and rampant disease resulting from the nearly fifteen years of civil conflict in Liberia that ended only in 2003, the foreign-born from Liberia, many of whom came with refugee status, count the highest percentage (20 percent) among West Africans of those nineteen years of age or under in their immigrant group. Furthermore, adoptions of Liberian children by American parents are on the rise. While Americans have adopted Ethiopian children for years, the number of adoptions from Liberia greatly expanded after 2003 and the end of the war. Some of the recent upsurge in interest in international adoptions in general has been sparked by high-profile celebrity cases, most notably those of Angelina Jolie and Madonna, but prospective parents are attracted to Liberia in particular because of its simpler regulations and more hospitable environment. Instead of a typical delay of two years or more to adopt in many countries, the average waiting period in Liberia is only eight months; moreover, it is a country in which U.S. agencies are permitted to operate, thereby facilitating what is always a daunting and complicated process.\textsuperscript{32}

Push and Pull: Immigrants and Refugees

During the span of the twentieth century the flow of West African migration shifted course from a pattern of relocation to Western European destinations based on long-standing associations with the former colonial powers of Britain and France to the United States instead.
Immigration policy in Europe that became increasingly more restrictive in part to discourage migration from its former colonies in Africa, such as the passage of legislation in France in 1974, ending legal immigration from the continent, coincided with more liberalized and equitable policies on this side of the Atlantic, especially in the areas of family reunification, skill-based provisions, and the criteria to claim refugee status. Two specific pieces of legislation especially contributed to the increased flow. The 1986 Immigration and Control Act made it possible for undocumented migrants to gain legitimacy, and under its provisions amnesty was granted to approximately thirty-five thousand Africans. The 1986 measure also introduced the lottery system that became part of the 1990 Immigration Act, the other significant legislative pull factor. This law increased the allotment of skilled newcomers, and thus separated the number of employment visas from those admitted through family reunification stipulations, and, even more significantly, included a Diversity Visa Program (more commonly known as “the lottery”) meant to broaden the nations of origin of new immigrants to incorporate underrepresented regions of the world by allotting fifty-five thousand randomly selected visas a year. The program initially begun as a pilot project to bring in more Irish immigrants as well as those from Eastern Europe, but sub-Saharan Africans have ended up heavily benefiting from this plan. Although they account for fewer than 4 percent of the foreign-born in the United States, they have garnered over 40 percent of the new lottery visas. Between 1995 (when the program was first implemented in its current form) and 2010, over three hundred thousand African newcomers have been able to take advantage of this initiative, winning in the process the much-coveted permanent residence credential (the Green Card). By the end of the 2000s, nearly half of all immigrants who obtained legal permanent residence through this channel were African-born (49 percent in 2009 and 48 percent in 2010). Since implementation of the DV Program, approximately 40 percent of Africans who have won the lottery hailed from West African countries, with those from Nigeria and Ghana representing the top numbers of recipients from the region.33 Once in the United States, lottery winners are then eligible to apply for family members to join them.

Moreover, in recent years Africans have increasingly been granted refugee status as their means of legitimate settlement in the United
States. Whereas after passage of the Refugee Act in 1980 the bulk of those who were resettled were from Vietnam and Russia, with the end of the Cold War combined with pressure from the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), the plight of African refugees became more widely recognized. In 2000, revisions to the Refugee Act significantly raised the ceiling for Africans overall from seven thousand to eighteen thousand a year, so that by 2007 a third of all refugees and asylees came from African countries. In addition, some who entered on short-term visas found that circumstances in their home countries had grown even more untenable in the time they were away and became eligible for amnesty programs. Others were able to provisionally legalize their standing through a measure established by Congress as part of the 1990 Immigration Act known as temporary protected status (TPS), granted to entire countries and meant to harbor those who cannot return home safely because of war, natural disaster, or other overwhelming temporary conditions for periods of up to eighteen months. The Liberian diaspora particularly benefited from this program, which was extended even beyond the end of the civil war in Liberia and the successful 2005 election of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf because the high levels of unemployment and lack of immediate resources to rebuild the country would have made it nearly impossible to absorb all at once the numbers of would-be returnees from the United States. In 2007 when TPS effectively ended for Liberians, a new provision of temporary legal status under presidential directive, known as deferred enforced departure (DED), was implemented to enable Liberian refugees to continue to live and work in the United States without fear of forced removal. In August 2011, President Obama gave authorization to extend DED status for Liberians until September 30, 2014.

Such policies have resulted in vibrant ethnic communities in select metropolitan areas. For example, since the 1990s refugees from Liberia who have been resettled in Philadelphia outnumber all other refugee populations in a city that since the early 1980s has proactively welcomed over thirty-five thousand refugees from diverse origins. Although qualifying for refugee status was a significant migration channel for select West African countries in the first decade of the twenty-first century, since 2009 because of improved conditions in their homelands,
the nations of West Africa have not been among the top ten origin countries for refugees to the United States. Finally, a crucial factor in redirecting the African diaspora was the prolonged recession in Europe in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s while the United States was experiencing economic growth. Until the mid-1970s African arrivals constituted a very small proportion of the foreign black population in the United States. Those who did migrate from the African continent in the mid-twentieth century came primarily from South Africa and Egypt and were mainly white, although included among this cohort were Asian Africans, those descendents of Indians who had been recruited to East Africa in the nineteenth century as laborers primarily to help build the railway system. Since the 1930s but especially after 1960 and the overthrow of colonial rule, those West Africans who were leaving the region came primarily to obtain a higher education and were almost all speakers of English rather than other European languages. Following long established colonial links, most of the young Africans who left the continent to study in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century went to European institutions of higher learning. However, a growing African interest in American education was sparked by the role of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) established well before the 1960s civil rights reforms—some date to the mid-nineteenth century—in attracting the earliest wave of African students and providing a milieu for young African American and African immigrants to interact. Nonetheless, those who matriculated at HBCUs, like Nnamdi Azikiwe, who arrived in 1925 and was to become the first president of Nigeria, and Kwame Nkrumah, who came to the United States a decade later and went on to become the first prime minister of Ghana, tended to return home after their studies.

In the 1970s, developments in Europe, Africa, and America prompted the beginning of a permanent and more visible black African presence. As Britain and other European nations were closing their doors to their former colonials, the United States, recently transformed by the civil rights struggle, was implementing more inclusive immigration laws. In the United States, the CBC was formed in 1971, when the election of nine African American members made the House of Representatives more racially integrated. The extent of the protracted battle for racial equality in the United States and, in particular, the role that the
CBC played in spearheading the legislative reforms that allowed for an increase in African newcomers are, unfortunately, often overlooked by the immigrants.

A few short weeks after passage of the pivotal Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Immigration Reform Bill, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, was quietly signed into law, ending the preferential quotas of the 1924 National Origins legislation, a policy that had been the crowning culmination of the early twentieth-century anti-immigrant crusade to restrict the flow of immigrants only to those of Western and Northern European descent and keep everyone else out. Initially, when the Hart-Celler measure was passed, it was largely ignored by activists in the civil rights movement whose focus was on the immediacy of addressing long-standing racial injustices in America. Indeed, not even the framers of the legislation itself recognized what a transformative impact the new policy would have on the racial and ethnic composition of American society. Congressman Emanuel Celler, the cosponsor of the bill, himself declared, “There will not be, comparatively, many Asians or Africans entering the country . . . since the people of Africa and Asia have very few relatives here, comparatively few could immigrate from those countries because they have no family ties to the U.S.”

But, of course, the framers were wrong. Here was legislation that, in the years since its approval, has led to sweeping demographic changes and a complete shake-up of the country’s ethnoracial landscape. Furthermore, between the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965 that enabled African Americans to fully participate in the electoral process and the Immigration Reform Bill of 1965 that opened the doors to immigrants of African descent from all over the world who had previously been excluded, the measures that President Lyndon Johnson signed into law resulted in policies that had a profound impact on the contours of African America. And if the rhetoric of racial equality so critical to the push for civil rights in the post–World War II era influenced the political rationale for rescinding an immigration policy in the United States based on a racialized national origins quota system, in a symbiotic relationship the leaders of the civil rights movement were, at the very same time, inspired by what they were hearing about the courageous struggles on the African continent in these years to overthrow
European colonial rule, establish national sovereignty, and exert a Pan-Africanist ideology.

It was not until the formation of the CBC, itself the result of the 1960s civil rights suffrage reforms that made the election of enough black congressmen to constitute such a quorum, however, that the direct links between African American advocacy and measures that would benefit potential immigrants from Africa (and the Caribbean) were made. Once elected, African American members of Congress served on committees that sponsored pivotal reforms of existing immigrant and refugee policy that led, for example, to an increase in the ceiling for African refugee admittances under the terms of the Refugee Act of 1980. Furthermore, the CBC endorsed the controversial provisions under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), also known as the Simpson-Mazzoli Act, that permitted undocumented immigrants who had lived in the United States since 1982 to regularize their status, a policy change that was crucial to making it possible for many hundreds of African immigrants to remain permanently in the country. This measure was especially beneficial to the small wave of undocumented newcomers from Senegal who in the 1970s began to arrive in New York City, where they sold their wares on street corners to passersby eager to purchase everything from watches to baseball caps at cheap prices. In subsequent years, African American legislators continued to lobby on behalf of African settlers for the implementation and extension of TPS to Liberians and Sierra Leoneans. Thus, in very real terms, the fruits of the civil rights movement have been a critical link in the establishment of the recent African diaspora community in the United States and could arguably be added to the list of salient pull factors in the context of their transnational migration.

At the same time, the unrelenting cycles of political conflict and internal corruption in West Africa in recent decades, resulting in toppled governments and repressive military dictatorships, have pushed many residents to relocate on a more permanent basis. Oftentimes rising fertility rates, ecological disasters, and displacement from the land have led to massive population pressures and such dense and rapid urbanization that endemic poverty and economic collapse have accompanied the civic unrest to create crisis conditions that further impel the migrants to uproot. They come to the United States in search of better
economic and educational opportunities, to seek asylum, as well as to reunify families. Given the income gap between the United States and the countries of this region—a 2005 study, for example, found that the per capita income of American citizens was more than twenty times higher than per capita income in Ghana and Senegal—it is no surprise that economic motivation has been a strong driver of this flow. Indeed, in its examination of reasons to emigrate, this same survey concluded that while women may have attached less importance to financial gain than their male counterparts since they also gave salience to family reunification, overall for both men and women the hope of significant improvement in their financial circumstances was by far the primary motivating factor in giving serious consideration to leaving their homelands for the United States.

Among those migrating as refugees, the earliest group was Nigerians escaping the 1960s Biafran War. However, more recently, it has been Liberians and Sierra Leoneans who have gained refugee status, fleeing escalating levels of political oppression and persecution. Of the 19,070 refugee arrivals from Africa in 2001, for example, 18 percent were from Liberia and 11 percent from Sierra Leone. With the end of civil war and the restoration of peace in both countries, the number of refugees has dropped dramatically over the past several years. In 2008, out of a total African refugee population of 8,943, fewer than 1,000 were Liberians and a trickle of 99 individuals came from Sierra Leone. Particularly for refugees but also those with voluntary immigrant status, the journey to the United States is not always direct and can often be the last step in an experience of multiple dispersals. Prior to the transatlantic move, many new immigrants and refugees had been involved in transborder migrations within West Africa and, in some cases, to other regions of the continent.

Demographic Trends and Patterns of Settlement

The immigrant-student tradition begun in the early part of the twentieth century persists to this day, facilitated by academic awards like those from the African Graduate Fellowship Program (AFGRAD), established in 1963, as well as Fulbright scholarships that have enabled promising candidates to benefit from an American education. This vanguard,
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However, has expanded in the twenty-first century to include sizeable numbers of newcomers from the region who arrive already highly educated and professionally trained. In fact, recent trends show that the United States, along with Canada and Australia, have been attracting the more highly educated African newcomers, while the European countries such as England and France tend to draw those who are less well trained.42

Levels of development in their home countries in both the public and private sectors simply have not been able to keep up with the number of young West Africans who have obtained secondary and post-secondary degrees and are seeking employment commensurate with their qualifications. Consequently, they look for such job prospects abroad, and thus the brain drain is often a concomitant theme of the new African diaspora. Particularly given the number of physicians and nurses among the highly trained professionals who end up emigrating to both the United States and Europe, some have voiced serious concern that the outflow of talent from the continent has robbed many African nations of the best of their homegrown human resources.43 Yet others on the brain gain side of the equation contend that these skilled migrants can do more to benefit their homeland economies by landing decent jobs in the United States and sending significant earnings back to relatives who have stayed behind. To be sure, some estimates put the level of remittances to African countries in recent years at close to $40 billion annually, more than four times the 1990 total of $9.1 billion, and remittances are second only to direct foreign investments in generating financial inflows. In 2010, Nigeria alone, the country with the largest numbers living abroad, received half of all remittances to the continent.44

A 2009 national marketing survey of African consumers revealed that the most prevalent reason given by the newcomers for why they migrated to the United States was for educational opportunity.45 Evidence from the qualitative interviews in this study confirms this aim. Indeed, according to U.S. Census Bureau findings, the educational attainment of Africans, both first and second generations, was higher than that of any other group, native- or foreign-born. Of African-born adults age twenty-five and older who resided in the United States in 2009, 41.7 percent held a bachelor’s degree or higher.46 This figure is
slightly higher than that of Asian immigrants and well above the 26.8 percent level of the total population of the foreign-born and the 28 percent of native-born adults. Among West African groups, Nigerians have the highest level of attainment of a bachelor’s degree or higher, at 60 percent. As one noted scholar of African American studies put it, “The irony cannot escape anyone: Africa, the least educated and most underdeveloped continent in the world has the most educated population in the world’s most developed country.”

By the 1990s, the first wave of West African settlers, whether arriving as students, refugees, or lottery holders or through other means, was starting to become naturalized and as American citizens could begin to develop a network that would facilitate further immigration by sponsoring immediate family members, including spouses, children, and parents, under the standard provisions of family reunification. Furthermore, among the foreign-born overall, Africans are less likely to be unauthorized, so that as legal residents a higher percentage of the population has been eligible to take advantage of these channels. Consequently, in addition to increases that had been driven by the initial quest for financial and educational gains, the pull of the Diversity Visa Program, and the movements of refugees, by the twenty-first century, it has been the migration of immediate relatives that has been the most significant in expanding the recent flow. As early as 2001, more than half of all African newcomers entered the country in this way. And because those from the Anglophone nations of the region as well as those from Cape Verde have resided in the United States for the longest period of time, they are more likely to have attained the necessary legal status to sponsor the migration of their kin than other African immigrants. Thus, in 2010, for example, as the oldest source country among African nations, Cape Verde had a 98 percent share of its immigrants who were admitted through family reunification. Furthermore, of the six countries that had the highest proportion of immigrants who came via the provisions for family sponsorship (at two-thirds or more)—Cape Verde, Malawi, Senegal, Gambia, Nigeria, and Ghana—all except Malawi are in West Africa. Yet while the African-origin population, like all the other foreign-born in recent years, relies on family reunification as their primary channel to the United States, the reason they are such a fast-growing cohort compared to other immigrant groups is
due to the additional numbers among them who qualify for either the Diversity Visa Program or for refugee status.  

Although the West African immigrant pool has diversified considerably with regard to socioeconomic factors when compared to the much smaller and more elite group who came before the 1980s, and despite the greater numbers of refugees in the mix of the past two decades, this is still a population that overall arrives with significant training and skills. A 2011 World Bank study classified the majority of the immigrants from Nigeria and Ghana, the two largest source countries, as highly skilled: 59 percent of Nigerian and 47 percent of Ghanaian newcomers.  

Another earlier survey based on the 2000 U.S. census determined that Africans were arriving with training in technical and scientific fields that fit occupational areas where there was still demand. For example, of those African immigrants who listed their occupations, 44 percent could be categorized as holding professional, managerial, and technical (PMT) positions, as compared to 34 percent of immigrants overall employed in PMT jobs. The advantage the immigrants have over native-born blacks and others can, in part, be accounted for by the selectivity of their premigration educational and income levels. Those who are eligible to make the most of professional and academic opportunities in the United States and those who can afford the costs of transcontinental relocation are, by and large, individuals who have had significantly higher educational and financial resources in their home countries from the start. Even applicants for the Diversity Visa Program must meet certain qualifications, including at least a high school diploma or a recent job that required two years or more of training, to gain entry. Moreover, studies show that legal immigrants tend to be more highly educated than the unauthorized, and Africans have a low percentage of undocumented arrivals among them. Finally, with the exception of those from Cape Verde and Senegal, West African immigrants rank high in English proficiency, which gives them another advantage in the workforce.  

A recurrent theme in the accounts of this and other research on the recent African diaspora, however, reveals that the premigration emphasis on education has become even sharper in the migrants’ new home, where the newcomers are known for their perseverance in procuring still more advanced educational training after relocating. According
to census numbers, African immigrants have a 96 percent high school graduation rate nationwide, a total that is 12 percent higher than the national average, while a disproportionate percentage of students at top universities are children of African immigrants.\textsuperscript{55}

Over three-quarters of African immigrants were adults of working age in 2007, but census findings confirm that higher levels of education and English proficiency for African newcomers have not necessarily produced comparable levels of income. A 2008 study of skilled immigrants showed that among the highly educated, Africans (and Latin Americans) do much worse in the job market than do Europeans and Asians and also that Africans have the highest unemployment rates among all foreign-born populations, including Latin Americans.\textsuperscript{56}

Furthermore, according to data from 2009, overall the African-born were more likely to live below the federal poverty line than both other immigrant populations and the native-born. There were striking differences among origin countries regarding poverty levels, however. Those from selected nations of West Africa, especially Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Ghana, were much less likely than newcomers from countries like Somalia and Sudan, who have arrived in such large numbers as refugees, to live below the poverty line.\textsuperscript{57} Nonetheless, with the exception of Nigerians, who make more than the average U.S. resident, West African immigrants as a whole have a slightly lower median household income than the overall population ($50,424 versus $52,029).\textsuperscript{58}

Both African men and women were more likely to be employed in the civilian labor force than immigrants in general, but many members of the contemporary influx work in the service economy—in hospitality services, in the health care industry, where they work as nurses, nursing assistants, orderlies, or respiratory and lab assistants, or in transportation-related jobs such as taxi drivers and airport porters—with the men also working in construction and extraction. For example, in 2008, 35 percent of Liberians could be found working in the service sector.\textsuperscript{59} Since the early 1980s, black immigrants have filled the lower-level positions of the health care support sector especially in the cities of the Northeast such as Boston and New York. Initially this group was mainly migrants of African descent hailing from the West Indies. More recently, however, West African arrivals have become more visible in this occupational sphere, challenging the dominance of the Caribbean
presence. As of 2009, compared to both the male and female immigrant populations overall, African men and women workers were more likely to report holding jobs as health care practitioners and in other health care support occupations. Indeed, fully a third of African women were working in health care jobs.\textsuperscript{60}

Their high rate of participation as health care practitioners reflects another common occupational trend. Confronted with structural barriers and other practical considerations, many West African men and women, both immigrants and refugees, take jobs that are, in many ways, radically different from what they did back at home and are not necessarily commiserate with their higher levels of professional training. Thus, in addition to technical, sales, or administrative positions, new arrivals work in construction, in landscaping, at food processing plants, and in other low-level, custodial service jobs such as security guards, parking lot attendants, busboys, and housekeepers. Nonetheless, as of 2008 over half of Nigerians (54 percent) reported that they were employed in managerial or professional occupations.\textsuperscript{61}

No matter what the job, however, the immigrants are more likely to be employed than native-born blacks. Data correlating levels of employment with race and ethnicity demonstrate the foreign-born from Africa positioned right in the middle of the rankings, below non-Hispanic whites and Asians but above Latinos and African Americans.\textsuperscript{62} Finally, as has been the case for many new immigrant groups before them, rather than joining the secondary labor force, some West Africans have gone into business for themselves as their strategy for making it in America, with Cape Verdeans having the highest rate of self-employment among this population.\textsuperscript{63}

These enterprises are almost always located in urban areas, where the vast majority of West African immigrants reside.\textsuperscript{64} Even members of refugee groups who with the help of their sponsor organizations have initially settled in rural districts eventually relocate to the cities, especially those places with sizable coethnic populations. Whether living in urban, suburban, or small town locales, however, they are more likely to be settled in the Northeast or South, with 75 percent of West Africans, almost equally divided, residing in these two regions of the country.\textsuperscript{65} In all the top metropolitan areas settled by African immigrants, the growth rate in the past decade exceeded 100 percent: in
Washington, D.C. Maryland-Virginia, 148.9 percent; New York City, 134.2 percent; Atlanta, 284.6 percent, Minneapolis-St. Paul, 628.4 percent; Houston, 129.1 percent; and Philadelphia-New Jersey, 220.6 percent. New York City is the largest single destination for those born in West African countries, and within the metropolis, the borough of the Bronx hosts the greatest numbers of West African residents. The other urban centers where West Africans constitute the most populous group of African settlers include Houston and Minneapolis (both 61 percent), Boston (60 percent), Chicago (58 percent), Philadelphia and the greater Washington, D.C., area (both 53 percent), and Atlanta (48 percent). With the exceptions of New York’s “Little Senegal” in West Harlem, “Fuuta Town,” a district in Brooklyn where Pulaar-speaking migrants from northern Senegal are aggregated and a burgeoning concentration of Ghanaians dwelling in what is becoming known as “Little Accra” in the Bronx, as well as particular neighborhoods where Cape Verdean immigrants congregate in selected cities of southeastern New England such as Brockton, Massachusetts, and Pawtucket, Rhode Island, West Africans do not, for the most part, inhabit visible ethnic enclaves. However, such geospatial clustering is always in flux. While predominantly inhabited by Senegalese, even Le Petit Sénégal is ethnically diverse. Not only do other Francophone West Africans, such as those from Côte d’Ivoire and Mali, reside there, but the neighborhood’s bustling business sector draws West African immigrant consumers who are residing throughout the New York metropolitan area and who partake of the products and services that the district offers as well as its vibrant social life. Souleymane Dembele, a cab driver who emigrated from Mali in 1992, lives in the Bronx, but that does not stop him from trekking at least twice a week to Les Ambassades, a Senegalese-owned café in Harlem; on Sundays he has a standing date with his West African compatriots that he says goes a long way to quelling his homesickness. The proprietor, Gorgoi “Abe” Ndoi, who opened the bistro in 2003, calls his establishment “a West African concept,” and it has become just that—a popular gathering spot for transplanted Africans. Increasingly, as well, the clientele frequenting the neighborhood shops and restaurants are as likely to come from English-speaking as French-speaking countries. The incremental shift from a national to a more regional local identity has led some to begin to refer to the area as Little West Africa.
instead. Indeed, in a 2010 radio interview reporting on the musical tastes of chef Samuelsson, he cited the particular influence of West African musicians in his neighborhood:

Where I live in Harlem is called “Little West Africa.” If you are in Harlem on a Saturday or Sunday, on the West side, you’ll see big tall Senegalese—West African men, from Mali, Ghana and they come from the mosque and they’ll come eat, talk and converse. And out of their cars, you hear . . . West African music, you can buy West African films, CDs, you can buy ginger juice . . . it’s truly a whole subculture.68

Because so many of those who live and work in the district are followers of Islam, you are also likely to catch the sound of the muezzin’s call to prayer ringing out five times daily, as is the religious custom. In another neighborhood of metropolitan New York, the South Bronx, where West Africans are also increasingly concentrated, the Francophone owner of a popular restaurant, in a clever twist that reinforces a broader regional identity, named his establishment Café de C.E.D.E.A.O., which is the French acronym for Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the official coalition of West African nations. Meanwhile, in the true definition of an ethnic enclave, since the early 1990s, when the contours of Little Senegal first began taking shape, a majority of the owners of the local businesses have also chosen to take up residence in that part of the city. Some community leaders have even credited West Africans with reinvigorating the neighborhood, as their industriousness and entrepreneurship have caught the attention of many observers, including city officials and religious leaders.69

Nonetheless, despite these few examples of residential aggregation in major urban areas, for the most part West African newcomers are more dispersed, living in districts where other recent immigrant groups, including other African, Caribbean, Latino, and Asian populations, are located, as well as in established African American neighborhoods. In metropolitan New York, for example, West Africans can often be found living in the areas of Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx that are predominantly populated by African Americans.70 Across the country, however, in Portland, Oregon, a very different geographic pattern has emerged. Recent census estimates show Portland’s population of U.S.-born
African Americans has declined slightly since 2000 but its African-born population increased nearly 90 percent from 2000 to 2007 and now makes up about 12 percent of the black population. Of course, no matter what region of the country, African immigrants of the earlier, pioneering generation who arrived when the restrictive residential covenants of institutionalized racial segregation were still in place, such as the practice of redlining, had no choice but to live in black neighborhoods. Moving to the white suburbs simply was not an option.

Increasingly, nonetheless, like many other new Americans of the last two decades, West Africans are acquiring the resources and have the choice to move to suburban neighborhoods; some migrate directly to settle in middle-class suburbs, bypassing congested and impoverished inner-city districts altogether, in a departure from the traditional urban ethnic succession model. What is noteworthy about their residential patterns is that they do not necessarily adhere to the long-standing racialized and segregated mappings of the American metropolis. Rather African immigrants are as likely to reside in affluent zip codes where non-Hispanic whites live as in disadvantaged areas where blacks and other nonwhites are the majority. For example, studies of metropolitan Washington show that the vast majority (90 percent) of African immigrants live in suburban locales, and while concentrations of the African foreign-born can be found in the more run-down neighborhoods east of the city such as Prince George's County, Maryland, an area with a large black population, they are just as likely to be living in predominantly white and wealthier Montgomery County, Maryland, or Fairfax County, Virginia.

Research that compared African immigrant with African American residential trends in the northeastern, southern, and midwestern regions of the United States confirmed the pattern of metropolitan Washington. The findings showed that African immigrants tend to live in neighborhoods with other residents who are also highly educated and who share a similar socioeconomic status regardless of racial background, while native-born blacks reside in locations where fewer than 20 percent of their neighbors hold a college degree. Furthermore, the African diaspora population typically lives in parts of the city that are likely to be highly segregated from African Americans. African immigrant segregation from African Americans in major metropolitan areas
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has hovered between 60 and 70 percent during the past two decades. The new African diaspora is thus scattered residentially across a broad socioeconomic and ethnoracial residential spectrum, unsettling the historically normative geography of racial divide that for decades has characterized the housing market in so many of America’s big cities.

Wherever they may reside, their religious participation is extensive, whether the affiliation is Christian, Muslim, indigenous African, or some combination of these faiths; there are simply very few nonbelievers among this population. While African services in the American setting may be associated with mainline religions such as the Methodists and Roman Catholics, the most rapid expansion has come from evangelical Christianity, which has experienced an ongoing and unprecedented surge in Africa and in other parts of the developing world. Thus, African migrants are following the trajectories of their Latino and African American counterparts, fueling a vibrant evangelical movement. West Africans, especially those from Nigeria and Ghana, are at the forefront of the new African church movement in the United States. Many of the founders were brought up in the Anglican, Methodist, and Orthodox churches but have branched out to Pentecostal, storefront congregations. Paradoxically, for decades the United States dispatched missionaries to West Africa to establish start-up churches, but today the reverse is taking place. Many of the independent and indigenous churches of West Africa are routinely sending missionaries from the region to America to minister to new immigrant communities and to recruit additional members to their congregations. This is a phenomenon that illustrates well the complexity of the transcontinental interpenetration and cross-fertilization of culture. African congregations in the United States typically maintain close links to churches in their countries of origin where local practices have been incorporated, sending pastors for training and exchanging clergy, hymnals, and prayer books.

Meanwhile, denominations have been multiplying at an explosive rate. While many of the leaders of the new African church movement have been active in their homeland congregations, increasingly many “American-made” pastors have emerged. Retaining their day jobs, as it were, such people of the new breed of men and women of the cloth are ministers on Sundays and designated weekday bible study days and
accountants, nurses, or professors during the rest of the week. Their congregations are heavily West African. Often, the dominant group in the membership reflects the national or even ethnic affiliation of the pastor and the leaders. Yet the rapid expansion of venues for religious worship has not just been confined to the Protestant sects. For example, in response to the arrival of growing numbers of Ghanaian Catholics, the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens added an apostolate in which Mass is conducted in Ashante and Fante, two main dialects of Ghana. Furthermore, like the Pentecostal Christians, the West African Muslim migrants, most of whom come from French-speaking countries, have developed their own storefront mosques while others regularly worship together in the homes of the Imams. They have also organized their own religious hubs, like the Senegalese Islamic Center in New York. As has been the case with so many other diaspora populations in the United States, past and present, West African churches and mosques have reshaped traditional practices in their new setting, establishing a theology of relevance whereby religious institutions function as organs for faith-based community development tailored to the specific needs of the immigrants.

Practicing West Africanness

As a diasporic identity, the designation of “West African” is an evolving concept, embraced by some and much less relevant to others of the various populations who are categorized under this grouping. Initially more imposed from the outside than self-selected, the term was first most widely used by the media to signify the Francophone, mainly Senegalese, residents of New York City, especially with regard to headline-grabbing incidents like the Amadou Diallo case or when West African street vendors made news in the 1990s as they battled real estate mogul Donald Trump and then mayor Rudolph Giuliani to protect their ability to hawk their wares on the sidewalks of Manhattan. By then the traders were a more diversified population, comprising the newly arrived from Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Niger who had joined the newcomers from Senegal, and thus the label “West African” served as even more convenient shorthand.

Outside of New York City and the large West African community that resides there, in other metropolitan areas where West Africans are
highly concentrated such as Houston and Minneapolis, they are much less likely to self-identify as West African. Rather, more commonly, the immigrants prefer to use more distinctive ethnic labels such as Yoruba or Mende or more precise national identities such as Cape Verdean or Liberian. Indeed, it is not surprising, given how recently in the grand scheme of world history national independence was achieved in the region of West Africa—beginning in the 1950s and ongoing until 1975—that many in the diaspora still wish to identify themselves in ethnic terms while others insist on a national identity given that as a people they held the status of colonials for so long, all the while yearning to fully possess their identity as a nation.

Nonetheless, in practice and as they settle into the various communities across the United States, the newcomers have developed what can be characterized as a West African collective sensibility. In other words, while they do not describe their ethnicity as West African, they still manage tropical food stores that cater to people from an array of West African countries, carrying Nollywood films and Ghanaian Highlife DVDs even if the owners are neither Nigerian nor Ghanaian themselves; they belong to congregations and masjids composed of people from diverse West African origins; and they support each other by attending functions sponsored by a variety of nationalities, even when the occasion does not specifically represent their particular homeland affiliation.

Still, like Kadiatou Diallo’s objection to how her son was tagged in the press coverage of his killing when she protested that “to call him West African revealed nothing,” most of the people who actually compose the new West African diaspora find the term lacking. Similarly in the aftermath of the 2011 scandal involving sexual assault charges against former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn by Nafissatou Diallo (no relation to Kadiatou and Amadou), a hotel chambermaid from Guinea, when a group of Sierra Leonean women in Atlanta discussed the dynamics, they too felt that the way the media described the accuser was insufficient. They resented the use of “West African” because they saw it as obscuring the victim’s Guinean nationality and, even worse, her specific ethnic background of Wolof, Fullah, or Mandingo. In this way, West Africans are no different from their South Asian, Central American, or Caribbean counterparts. In general, regional labels or
even more broadly construed pan-ethnic terminology such as “Latino,” “Asian,” or “West Indian,” while often preferable at the institutional level and in the marketplace due to their economy and convenience, have not been embraced by individual members of their respective groups as they find such umbrella categories imprecise, artificial, and without personal meaning. As one first-generation Sierra Leonean woman perceptively phrased it,

In Sierra Leone we are not West Africans, even though we do the West African School Certificate; our country is a member of ECOWAS; we have relatives in several West African countries; and we have a common “West African pidgin English.” I guess in Sierra Leone we took our regional identity for granted. Now in the United States we are being asked to see the significance of what it means to be part of the regional collectivity that shaped us and continues to influence us. We don’t like that it is being imposed on us. But in reality what is happening is that we practice West Africanness but we are not “West Africans.”

No matter what the ethnic or nationality group, such blanket terms do not account for the diversity and complexities of the cultures that fall under such broadly based taxonomies, and the inadequacies and ambiguities of these labels have become increasingly more apparent. Even so, over time, designations such as “Hispanic” and “Middle Eastern” and the category of “West African” under consideration here, despite their oversimplifications, become more widely utilized and accepted by insiders and outsiders alike.