Voices of Concern, Voices of Hope:

Experiences of African Immigrants in Detroit

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Competition with Domestic Workers:
The Impact of Immigration on African Americans

1. Setting the Stage

a. Detroit as a Laboratory for African-African American Relations

This article examines relations between African immigrants and African Americans in Detroit, Michigan. Understanding African immigrant perceptions of African Americans is critical to any effort to build cohesion and shared values among African immigrants and African Americans and also to break down stereotypes held by each group of the other. African immigrants and African Americans have a delicate relationship. At first glance, similarities in skin tones, facial features and other physical characteristics render many African immigrants and African Americans indistinguishable from each other. Yet, their shared ethnic heritage does not override their varied history and cultural legacies. Like other Americans, African Americans have been inculcated in the belief that Africa is a backward, war-torn, famine-stricken continent populated by people split along tribal lines and ruled by despots. Like other immigrants, African immigrants have been fed a steady diet of U.S. global popular culture depicting African Americans in a pervasively negative light as denizens of urban ghettos who dress and talk in a rebellious manner.[1]

This article presents the views of African immigrants towards African Americans with whom they share a common ancestry. Many of the views are disturbing and, frankly, are based on perception and not reality. These views, however, are authentic and worthy of being heard – even if the only point of hearing the views of African immigrants is to refute them or to work to build a future in which they will no longer be regarded as valid.

[1] Anyi K. Djamba, African Immigrants in the United States: A Socio-Demographic Profile in Comparison to Native Blacks, 34 Journal of Asian and African Studies 2 (1999).

Unlike other cities in which African immigrants have settled, African immigrants to Detroit live in both the largest African American majority city in the U.S. and the most racially-segregated metropolitan area in the U.S. At first glance, Detroit could be seen as a microcosm of the world: in Africa and Detroit, persons of African heritage predominate; in Africa and Detroit, there is a perception – perhaps a reality – that one's fate is directed by persons of non-African heritage; in Africa and Detroit, there is pride in African heritage. As this highly-selective, anecdotal and non-statistical study concludes, the reality differs greatly. Detroit is not a microcosm and shared heritage and historical events that brought African Americans and African immigrants together in Detroit do not override stereotypes and perceptions held by each group toward the other.

Detroit is an ideal laboratory to study the fault lines and bridges between each group. The 2000 Census reported that just under 10,000 African immigrants lived in the Detroit Metropolitan Statistical Area and Detroit ranked 21st among Metropolitan Statistical Areas in terms of African-born immigrants.[2] Yet, the number of sub-Saharan African immigrants to Detroit nearly tripled in the past ten years.[3] Many African immigrants are drawn to Detroit in greater numbers due to its standing in the African American community as a sheltering and familiar environment in which African Americans hold positions of political, economic and social leadership and also due to a unique refugee service organization that exists only in Detroit.

Among African immigrants, Detroit is often referred to as the "Atlanta of the North".[4] Atlanta has drawn a disproportionate share of recent African immigrants, in part, because

[2] U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Data, African-Born Population in U.S. Metropolitan Statistical Areas.
[3] Joseph Takougang, Contemporary African Immigrants to the United States, http://africamigration.com/archive_02/j_takougang.htm
[4] Interview with Kalonji K., July 27, 2007.

African immigrants feel welcome in a city where African Americans occupy important political and economic positions in the city administration.[5] As in Atlanta, in Detroit, virtually all city executive- and staff-level positions are held by African Americans, the cost of living is relatively low, and residents of Detroit are overwhelmingly African American.[6] Despite its sluggish economy and entrenched poverty, Detroit continues to attract persons of African heritage seeking a better life for themselves and their families.

b. The Scope of the Study

This study examines the broader context of relations between African immigrants and African Americans and addresses several specific concerns: (i) African immigrant perspectives of African Americans in terms of historical and cultural values held by African Americans; (ii) difficulties in communication between each group; (iii) the understanding of race by African immigrants; (iv) the value placed on education by African immigrants; and (v) the lack of social ties between African immigrants and African Americans. As African Americans hear the perspective of African immigrants – as painful and flawed as those perspectives may be, come into closer contact with African immigrants, and realize the hardships African immigrants endured to come to the U.S., they may become more appreciative of the perspectives African immigrants bring to the African American experience. Conversely, if African immigrants understood African American culture and realized the difficult journey and obstacles faced by African Americans throughout U.S. history and today, African immigrants may better appreciate the collective and individual sacrifices made by African Americans to secure the rights

[5] Id.
[6] Peter Gavrilovich and Bill McGraw, eds., The Detroit Almanac, Detroit Free Press, 2000, 26.

African immigrants take for granted when they enter the U.S. The study concludes with several concrete suggestions for actions that could be taken by all parties to ease tensions and promote open and constructive dialogue on race and ethnicity.

c. Sources of Data

Data was derived from primary and secondary sources. Many of the African immigrants interviewed during the course of the study are residents or former residents of Freedom House, a Detroit-based nonprofit serving persons fleeing persecution for safety in the U.S. or Canada. Over 80% of the clients served by Freedom House are from sub-Saharan Africa and the vast majority of those clients remain in Detroit after they are granted asylum and as they petition for their families in Africa to join them in Detroit. Freedom House is a unique venture: it is the only nonprofit organization in the U.S. serving the housing, legal, medical and job training needs of persons seeking asylum all under one roof. Other African immigrants surveyed are former or current clients of the Immigration Law Clinic at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, where the author serves as director and an assistant professor of law.

d. Methodology

The study makes no pretense to be statistically accurate or to represent all African immigrant perspectives. The subjects for the study were chosen deliberately by the author as African immigrants who might encounter African Americans on a sustained or regular basis. Certain African Americans were excluded from the study when it became apparent that they had little or no exposure to African immigrants. Finally, given the fact

that most immigrants to the U.S. from Africa are cultural, social and educational elites, the study reflects the views of African immigrants who had some prior exposure to inter-group relations and could articulate their views cogently.

In addition, the author acknowledges that he is not a member of either group and, in that sense, may be seen as an outsider by each group and not privy to candid observations. On the other hand, by virtue of not being a member of either group, the author's allegiances or prejudices may not have been suspected and information may have flowed more freely than had he been an African immigrant or African American. That said, any cultural or racial insensitivity on the part of the study is the sole responsibility of the author, for which he apologizes in advance and looks forward to civil correction.

2. African Immigrant Perspectives of African Americans

a. Understanding of African History and Culture

Many African immigrants attribute some of the distance between African immigrants and African Americans to differing understandings of their respective cultural heritages. A common complaint among African immigrants about African Americans is that they are perceived to lack authentic pride in their African history and heritage. African immigrants are proud of their cultural heritage and identify strongly, if not with being African, then with their ethnic group and nationality.[7] For example, Felix, an African immigrant from Cameroon, notes that, "I am from Bamenda, I am Bamileke, I am Cameroonian: these make me who I am and I draw strength from each of these parts

[7] John A. Arthur, Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States, Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 2000, at 81.

of my heritage."[8] Felix hastened to add that, as an Anglophone Bamileke, he had not always been treated fairly by the Francophone-dominated government of Cameroon but he is still proud that he is Cameroonian.[9]

Not all African immigrants reported that "African culture" provides them strength: several African immigrants reported that their ethnic or national heritage was a greater source of pride. For example, Merid, an immigrant from Ethiopia, expressed that he respects first his heritage as an Ethiopian and that he does not think of himself first and foremost as an African.[10] Merid is a successful stockbroker who owns a large home in an affluent suburb of Detroit. As a father of several children born in the U.S., Merid purposefully tries to instill Ethiopian values and heritage in his family through active membership in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and annual trips to Ethiopia. He reports that his children have assimilated into American culture but resist being identified as African American or associating to a greater degree with African Americans than with children of other ethnic groups.

In addition to recognizing his heritage as Ethiopian rather than strictly African, Merid's views of African Americans diverge somewhat from those of other Africans. Over the thirty years he has lived in the U.S., Merid has encountered African Americans from across the social and economic spectrums and he has a more nuanced and less judgmental view of African Americans than that held by many African immigrants. In particular, Merid places less emphasis on outward appearances and speech as barometers of an African American's intelligence or work ethic: "I have come to realize that a person is much more than what they look or sound like – some of the finest people I

[8] Interview with Felix N., July 26, 2007.
[9] Id.
[10] Interview with Merid A., May 25, 2007.

know are African Americans I would have rejected years ago."[11] Merid helps more recent African immigrants adjust to U.S. culture and urges them not to make quick decisions about with whom they choose to socialize. Merid also works with African Americans to correct assumptions about Africa and African immigrants.

Despite the claim by African immigrants that African Americans are ignorant of African history, several African immigrants surveyed freely admit that they are similarly ignorant regarding African American history and shared social values. Several residents of Freedom House visited the Charles A. Wright Museum of African American History and report a new-found respect for the African American experience. After viewing a graphic exhibit regarding the practice of lynching, African immigrants expressed shock and outrage that such barbarism had been inflicted upon African Americans. Prosper, an African immigrant from Congo, noted that the photographs of the lynchings remained in his mind many months after seeing the exhibit and that he now understood that the collective African American psyche had been scarred by this practice. Prosper noted that, "Whether your great-grandfather or grandfather had to live through the time of lynchings, the retelling of that experience passed down from generation to generation must have some effect on African Americans."[12]

Every African immigrant surveyed reported that their heritage is a source of personal strength and pride.[13] Many African immigrants perceive African Americans as largely ignorant of African history and culture and several African immigrants blamed a lack of cultural heritage among African Americans for pervasive problems in African American society, including unemployment, low education levels, eroded family

[11] Id.
[12] Interview with Prosper K., July 14, 2007.

structures, and drug and alcohol dependency.[14] Yet most African immigrants surveyed reacted negatively to attempts by African Americans to reclaim an African cultural heritage lost to slavery, Jim Crow and the denial of civil rights. Several African immigrants surveyed openly mocked African American cultural practices intended to promote African heritage, such as Kwanzaa, as imposing on African Americans allegedly African traditions with very little basis in reality.[15] Kalonji, an African immigrant from Congo, ridiculed Kwanzaa as a "false celebration" and argued that, "if African Americans need to invent a holiday to feel good about themselves, then they have a problem." Wario, an African immigrant from Kenya, noted that several of the Swahili-based words used in the Kwanzaa ceremony were nonsensical and deplored what he perceived as the lack of authentic African heritage.[16] Black History Month is similarly lost of many African immigrants. One African immigrant stated: "February has no meaning; we don't feel a sense of connection."[17]

Other surveys confirm that many African immigrants believe that African Americans hold little regard for African history or cultural values:

> African students are taught about slavery, about African history and culture. But native-born black Americans are rarely taught African history. The result is that native-born blacks know little about their African heritage. Few native-born blacks have taken it upon themselves to learn about African culture. We are a house divided.[18]

African immigrants do not think that African Americans understand the struggles for independence, economic development, and resources in which Africans have been

[14] John A. Arthur, Invisible Sojouners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States, Westport, CT, Praeger Publishers, 2000, at 81.
[15] Interview with Kalonji K., July 23, 2007 and interview with Felician N., July 27, 2007.
[16] Interview with Wario H., June 18, 2007.
[17] Erin Chan, Overcoming Perceptions: African Immigrants Seek Ties, Harmony with American Blacks, Detroit Free Press, February 25, 2005.
[18] Arthur, at 81.

engaged.[19] Adetoun, from Nigeria, reports that, "[m]any African Americans seem to carry a chip on their shoulder about their struggles without understanding that Africans also struggled during the colonial and post-colonial period."[20] Worse still, from the perspective of African immigrants, African Americans are believed to regard African immigrants as culturally and economically backward.[21] African immigrants perceive that African Americans hold the same negative views of Africans as do American whites, namely that Africa is a continent rife with government corruption, poor health conditions, little economic opportunity, and bloody tribal and ethnic divisions.[22]

Joscky, an immigrant from Congo, who is employed as a security guard and has a great deal of interaction with African American coworkers, reports that his African American colleagues routinely ask him whether he learned to drive a car in the U.S., if he owned a television in Congo, and if he went to school in Africa.[23] The irony in Joscky's situation is that he is university-educated and held a high-ranking position overseeing the transactions of financial institutions in Congo and now works as an evening security guard at the corporate headquarters of a large U.S. bank.

African immigrant disappointment with perceptions of African Americans extends to perspectives on gender roles. Adetoun, mentioned above, is a young woman who is often approached by African American men interested in dating her. Adetoun is a very devout Christian and she is put off by what she sees as the crude and un-Christian behavior of many young African American men but, according to Adetoun:

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[19] Id.
[20] Interview with Adetoun O., May 25, 2007.
[21] Id.
[22] Id.
[23] Interview with Joscky K., July 25, 2007.

> I was most taken aback when an African American man told that he wanted an African woman for a wife because we are more subservient than African American women. Not only is that a stereotype of African women but it shows that African American men feel the need to dominate their wives.[24]

Other African immigrants report similar pejorative attitudes among African Americans. Onwuka Uchendu, from Nigeria, became so tired of ignorant questions that he embellishes his answers:

> I say, "Yes, we have cars, and we have traffic lights, and when they turn green, the cars go through, and when they turn red, the elephants go through." If they want to mock and embarrass me, then I play the game.[25]

This method of relating to each other does not lend itself to fostering an atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect. Based on the responses from African immigrants, African Americans are perceived to not possess a high level of knowledge of and respect for African American history or culture. Again, whether a perception is true or not is not at issue: what matters most is that the perception is given a voice.

b. Communication Barriers

For other African immigrants, difficulties in associating with African Americans stem from a more basic concern: the actual or perceived inability of many African immigrants to understand the speech patterns and intonations used by many African Americans. Honore, a recent immigrant from Rwanda, commented that African Americans are hard to understand and impatient when asked to repeat themselves:

> I guess that, until they hear my accent, African Americans assume that I am one of them and they speak to me in slang and, when I ask

[24] Interview with Adetoun O., May 25, 2007.
[25] Erin Chan, Overcoming Perceptions: African Immigrants Seek Ties, Harmony with American Blacks, Detroit Free Press, February 25, 2005.

> them to repeat what they said or I cannot understand them, they sometimes get angry and just walk away.[26]

This is a common refrain among African immigrants to Detroit. Many African immigrants come from the educated elite and, if they are not native English speakers, often possess some degree of fluency in English. The inability to understand the English spoken by some African Americans may impede the ability of African immigrants and African Americans to interact socially and professionally. English-speaking African immigrants, such as Nigerians and Anglophone Cameroonians, also struggle with African American vernacular and intonations.[27] In extreme instances, African immigrants may not approach African Americans to engage in casual conversation due to the linguistic divide. As noted below, many African immigrants view education and, foremost among all forms of education, the capacity to speak and understand English as paramount to success.

Emmanuel, from Senegal, is insistent about the value of learning English: "Learning correct English is the first step to assimilate into American culture."[28] He faults many African Americans for taking their education for granted while not even trying to use correct English. Emmanuel's chief complaint regarding African American vernacular is that, to his ears as someone trying hard to learn English, the vernacular sounds sloppy, imprecise and disrespectful. To date, Emmanuel has only met a few African Americans in positions of authority and, when he did, he was struck by the dividing line among African Americans who spoke correct English and those who spoke African American vernacular. He attributed the division to widely varying education

[26] Interview with Honore K., June 19, 2007.
[27] Interview with Simon N., July 18, 2007; interview with Adetoun O., May 25, 2007.
[28] Interview with Simon N., July 18, 2007.

levels and relative work ethic among African Americans. Based on his analysis of African American speech patterns, Emmanuel made certain assumptions and self-selected the African Americans with whom he wished to associate. Emmanuel, as an educated professional with aspirations of economic success in the U.S., chose to associate with more educated and upwardly mobile African Americans and rejected African Americans who spoke "black English". Whether right or wrong, African immigrants make assumptions about African Americans based on their speech and African American vernacular is a distinct turnoff to African immigrants.

c. Understanding the Importance of Race

Previous studies of African immigrants indicate that Africans attach less importance to their race as a defining characteristic than do African Americans. For example, the seminal study by Professor John A. Arthur, Invisible Sojourners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States, concludes that African immigrants are not preoccupied with race but, instead, focus on educational attainment and human capital as necessary for success in the U.S.[29] African immigrants recognize that racism and discrimination exist in U.S. society and can impede economic progress but believe those obstacles can be overcome through education, persistence and entrepreneurial motivation.[30] An African immigrant quoted in the Arthur study stated: "In spite of past discriminatory practices, I know many native-born blacks who have quit trying. Some

[29] Arthur, at 79.
[30] Arthur, at 77.

have consciously decided not to empower themselves by committing to education. You cannot always blame the white man."[31]

African immigrants often express their frustration with their African American counterparts who they perceive as hampering their own progress: "even when you succeed, you are still considered a failure because you left the ghetto and became too white."[32] Yet African immigrants can be somewhat naïve regarding race relations. As one African immigrant noted in a separate study:

> Growing up in Africa . . ., the culture of White racism and prejudice was not part of the African upbringing . . . . [w]e were aware of the history of slavery but, in all cases, we were willing to forget and forgive. It never occurred to us that we would be the targets of hate simply because of the color of our skin. Interestingly, our Black and brown skins did not open the doors wide for us in the African American community either. We were, and remain to many African Americans, outsiders or beneficiaries of their struggle against a racist society. If we are too successful and live in a nice White neighborhood, then we are accused of betraying our race, being "Black Bourgeois" and wanting to be White. To White neighbors, we are safe because we are Blacks from Africa . . ., not from the South or Brooklyn and, to their stereotypical way of thinking, we do not do drugs or alcohol or have big late night parties.[33]

African immigrants and African Americans exist in separate and conflicting worlds and, in many cases, share only the common physical characteristics by which they are judged by majority society. Indeed, African immigrants are often surprised to be the beneficiaries of racist attitudes towards African Americans. Bryce, an African immigrant from Burundi, recalls:

> I first became aware of subtle racism when my white supervisor at the factory where I worked learned that I had a graduate degree and he told me that "this job is for your brother"." I did not understand what he meant and asked him to explain and he told me that, unlike me – an educated and motivated African -- , African Americans at the factory were

[31] Arthur, at 78.
[32] Arthur, at 78..
[33] Id. at 17.

> better suited for the job because they lacked motivation. Of course, my supervisor claimed he wasn't a racist because he had not lumped me together with all blacks.[34]

Clearly, Bryce benefited from his supervisor's attitude and he was promoted to a less physically-demanding position in the factory. What may be more telling is that Bryce felt no obligation to correct his supervisor and, in fact, agreed with his supervisor regarding the perceived lack of motivation among the African American workers. The accident of common racial ancestry, in the minds of many African immigrants, does not outweigh the differences African immigrants perceive between themselves and African Americans.

For many African immigrants, the workplace provides an environment in which they must confront their own and other's attitudes about race and ancestry. Wario, an African immigrant from Kenya, earned his university and post-graduate degrees in the U.S. and now provides mental health counseling to Michigan prison inmates. In that position, he comes into frequent contact with African Americans as the majority of his colleagues and the inmates are African American. Wario sees the African American inmates as eager to blame their problems on racism and poverty while white inmates are more likely to blame drugs or alcohol for their personal and legal troubles.[35]

Wario has an uneasy relationship with his African American colleagues and the African American inmates. Wario reports that African American inmates will often approach African American staff and ask them to perform small favors, such as contacting a relative or mailing a package, all of which are clear violations of rules.[36]

[34] Interview with Bryce A., May 25, 2007.
[35] Interview with Wario H., June 13, 2007.
[36] Id.

Many African American staff will honor these requests and, when challenged by Wario regarding a rules infraction, will explain that they are merely "helping a brother". Wario is also approached by African American inmates for favors and he refuses to honor their requests. As a result, the African American inmates openly refer to Wario as "Uncle Tom" or "sell-out".

In counseling sessions, when Wario suggests that racism may not be at the heart of all of their personal or legal troubles, African American inmates often become confrontational and accuse Wario of not knowing about their experiences because he did not grow up black in Detroit. The lack of trust between the African American inmates and Wario has hampered his ability to provide mental health counseling and his supervisor now assigns Wario to work exclusively with white inmates or African American inmates who abide by the institutional rules.

It would be convenient to attribute Wario's lack of empathy with African Americans to an absence of knowledge of the African American experience or racial prejudice, but Wario has studied African American history extensively and had several close African American friendships at university. Wario, too, has felt the sting of racial prejudice. In college, he dated a white woman but her parents broke off their relationship when they learned that Wario was black. Wario met with her parents and tried to explain that he was from Africa and may not fit in with their preconceived notions regarding African Americans. Her parents would not listen and prohibited Wario from dating their daughter: they explained that they "only wanted what was best" for her. Wario respected their wishes and ended the relationship. Wario's comments underscore the point that,

even African immigrants educated in the U.S. and who themselves have been the victim of racial prejudice, may hold negative views of African Americans.

In addition, several African immigrants surveyed do not share a high level of respect for Africa American leaders. Merid, an immigrant from Ethiopia who has lived in the U.S. for many years, is adamant that African American leaders have failed to advance the cause of African Americans as a whole.[37] In particular, he faults Rev. Al Sharpton for whipping up resentment among lower-income African Americans against whites. In contrast, he praises Bill Cosby for his straight talk to African Americans regarding personal responsibility and the value of education.

Despite his personal encounter with racial prejudice, Wario also deplores African American leaders, including the Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, whom he accuses of using African Americans for their own personal and political gain while taking few concrete actions to help African Americans. In a similar vein, Simon, an immigrant from Cameroon, claims that Detroit reminds him of Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, in terms of the poverty and poor living conditions that he sees in certain neighborhoods of Detroit.[38] Simon was a professor in Cameroon and reads widely regarding Detroit and its history. He openly wonders whether the problems in Detroit and in Yaounde have the same source: political corruption among an entrenched political and ethnic elite.

Few African immigrants can appreciate distinctions between African and African American culture better than Jennifer. She arrived in the U.S. when she was eight and attended multiethnic schools in Los Angeles until she turned fourteen, when she moved to Detroit. Jennifer is from Nigeria but has been separated from her birth family for

[37] Interview with Merid A., May 25, 2007.
[38] Interview with Simon N., July 18, 2007.

several years and now lives with an African American foster family in Detroit and attends Detroit Public Schools. When she first went to school in Detroit, she remembers wondering "where are all the other kids?": she was struck by the near-complete lack of diversity in her school and the fact that the only non-African Americans she encountered were several teachers and school administrators.[39]

In Los Angeles, her classmates would tease her about her accent and her hair but she did not feel especially singled-out because her classmates were a mix of whites, Hispanics, Asians, Arabs and African Americans and everyone received and doled out a share of ethnic-based teasing. In Detroit, Jennifer's classmates teased her about whether she lived in a mud hut in Nigeria and whether she ate monkey and they disparaged her for "acting white" when she received good grades on exams and homework assignments. "My foster family and some people at school have been just great", reports Jennifer, "but I guess I was a little surprised at the hostility some people felt towards me."[40] To cope with that hostility, Jennifer sought out other students to whom she could relate and joined the Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) unit at her school, in which students are held to high educational and moral standards and drill and wear military uniforms on a routine basis.

Jennifer recognizes the positive and negative aspects of living as a member of a majority community:

> In some ways, it's comforting to live in a nearly all-black neighborhood and attend an all-black high school but I know there is a wider world out there that is not like this and I need to know how to live in that world. As much as I respect African Americans, my brain is not African American and, while I understand something of the anger many African Americans

[39] Interview with Jennifer L., July 31,2007.
[40] Id.

> feel, I do not share that anger – I just want to get on with my life and not live in a place where everyone looks like me.[41]

Jennifer plans to attend college and earn a business degree but, for now, her entry into a multicultural society in which she will be judged on her character and skills and not her skin color will be through service in the U.S. Marine Corps. Jennifer plans to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps as soon as she becomes a Legal Permanent Resident of the U.S.

d. Importance of Education

The Detroit public school system faces many challenges, including declining student enrollment, low relative test scores, and a history of financial and administrative mismanagement. In general, African immigrants are better educated than their African American counterparts.[42] Based on perceptions of the Detroit public school system and the importance placed by African immigrants on education, many African immigrants will go to great lengths to ensure that their children are not placed in what they perceive to be a failing school system. In a separate effort to increase understanding of immigration and immigrants among school-age children, over a three-year period the author spoke to over thirty fifth-grade classes spread evenly between Detroit and its surrounding suburbs. At each visit to a classroom, the author asked if any students or their parents were not born in the U.S. In the fifteen Detroit classrooms I visited, in which nearly all students were African American, only two students reported that either they or a parent were born in Africa. In the suburban classrooms, the incidence was far greater: in a single classroom of 28 students in Troy, Michigan, the parents of four

[41] Id.
[42] Anyi K. Djamba, African Immigrants in the United States: A Socio-Demographic Profile in Comparison to Native Blacks, 34 Journal of Asian and African Studies 2 (1999).

students were born in Africa and even in Grosse Pointe, a suburb traditionally lacking in cultural diversity, nearly every classroom visited contained at least one student born in or whose parents were born in Africa and, in fact, in two classrooms, African-connected students outnumbered African American students by a 2:1 ratio.

Conversations with African immigrants with school-age children bear out the validity of this observation. Philippe, an African immigrant from Congo, has three children in primary and middle school:

> Before my children came here from Africa, I lived in a one-room apartment in Detroit and worked three jobs so I could afford to move with them to Madison Heights [a middle class suburb of Detroit]. People warned me about the Detroit schools and I would not let my children go there.[43]

Similarly, Ilonga reported that he worked a second job to afford an apartment in Troy, a Detroit suburb, so that his children, in his eyes, would not be disadvantaged educationally.[44] This anecdotal information may indicate that, at a higher rate than African Americans, African immigrants place a greater value on education as a means of advancement and are willing to work hard to afford houses in suburban Detroit where the schools are perceived to provide a better education. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau bears out that African immigrants tend to live in whiter neighborhoods: in southeast Michigan, the population is approximately 45 percent white where African immigrants live but only approximately 17 percent white where African Americans live.[45] The data, coupled with the anecdotal information, suggests that African immigrants are more likely than African Americans to live in diverse communities. Whether that is due to

[43] Interview with Phillipe A., July 3, 2007.
[44] Interview with Ilonga I., July 23, 2007.
[45] U.S. Census Bureau, data compiled by the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, 2005.

differences in desire for better schools, historical population trends dictated, in part, by racial covenants and property restrictions that prevailed throughout Detroit's suburbs until fairly recently, or simply that African immigrants find it easier to live among neighbors who do not look like them.[46]

e. African-African American Social Relations

African immigrants surveyed largely socialize in intra-African immigrant circles and social and economic relations are formed primarily among immigrants from the African Diaspora. The immigrant experience of African immigrants brings them into contact with African Americans but African immigrants self-select their social peers from among other African immigrants. A great deal of African immigrant socializing in Detroit is centered on a soccer league comprised almost entirely of African immigrants. Each soccer team is comprised of African immigrants from specific countries or regions: the Congolese team plays the Cameroonian team, and so on. The league intentionally plays in Detroit to avoid any problems that they perceive a large gathering of blacks might lead to in the suburbs but the players have received a mixed reaction from the African Americans who watch the games.

Jean Pierre, an African immigrant from Congo, reports that African Americans, at first, appeared confused to see a large group of black men playing soccer and soon realize that the players are African immigrants and either ignore or are dismissive of the African players or, in a friendly spirit, challenge the African players to play basketball or other "American sports" such as baseball or football.[47] The African immigrants in Detroit

[46] Peter Gavrilovich and Bill McGraw, eds., The Detroit Almanac, Detroit Free Press (2000), 108.
[47] Interview with Jean Pierre M., July 23, 2007.

generally adhere to their cultural icons, such as soccer, rather than branch out into other sports, which could increase their social interaction with African Americans. Jean Pierre reports: "It's not that I don't like basketball or baseball or football but I would rather play soccer with Africans who understand me than with African Americans who don't."[48]

Wario characterizes his social relations with African immigrants as "easy" and with whites as "good – once they know I am not from here" but with African Americans as a "grey area".[49] He explained what a "grey area" means to him:

> When I first meet an African American, we each circle each other bit and try to figure each other out. In my mind, I am asking "Is he a militant? Does he know anything about Africa? Does he hate white people?" Maybe in his mind he is asking similar questions. Once we figure each other out, we can either relate to each other as separated brothers or as the sons of Abraham, each casting his own lot.[50]

Work and school bring African immigrants together with African Americans but in social settings African immigrants can select with whom they wish to spend time and in whose company they feel most at ease. It may be telling that African immigrants surveyed tend to cluster among their peers.

3. Conclusions

Based on the results of this admittedly statistically-insignificant and anecdotal survey, African immigrants, in Detroit, have little affinity for African Americans, much less any interest in being identified by others as African American.[51] The results of this survey confirm what others have previously reported. In his landmark study, Professor

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[48] Id.
[49] Interview with Wario H., June 13, 2007.
[50] Id.
[51] Arthur, John A. Invisible Sojouners: African Immigrant Diaspora in the United States. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000.

Arthur found that, "for a large number of African immigrants, the status that they attempt to claim vis-à-vis the dominant society is that of "foreigner" . . . . [b]y stressing their national or continental origins, the Africans hope that they will receive better treatment from whites than African-Americans receive."[52] Similar to the African immigrants surveyed by Professor Arthur, African immigrants surveyed in this study reported that the status of "foreigner" does not carry the same negative connotations as being "African American".[53]

Much as African immigrants may try to distance themselves from African Americans, African immigrants understand that they are considered by the dominant culture to be African American.[54] For that reason, African immigrants surveyed reported that they stress their accents, avoid clothing styles worn by African American youth, and do not socialize with African Americans.[55] In fact, when asked in the study whether they felt an affinity for African Americans, several African immigrants reported that they felt the closest connection to elderly African Americans because they shared patterns of dress, speaking, and demeanor.[56]

One of the problems cited by an astute observer of African-African American relations as unique to Detroit is the near absence of a strong black middle class. Merid argues that, without a viable middle class, African Americans skew to opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum and patterns of entrenched poverty and a growing underclass undercut efforts to bridge racial divides.[57] Merid claims that African immigrants find it

[52] Id. at 4, citing previous Bryce-LaPorte Study, 1973 and Model Study, 1991.
[53] Interview with Kalonji K., July 27, 2007.
[54] Id. at 73.
[55] Interview with Jean Pierre M., August 1, 2007; Interview with Adetoun O., May 25, 2007.
[56] Id.
[57] Interview with Merid A., June 18, 2007.

difficult to relate to affluent, more educated African Americans because of their differing socioeconomic status and also to lower-income, less educated African Americans because of negative perceptions held by African immigrants. Unless and until African immigrants learn to appreciate and value all African Americans, and African Americans develop a larger middle class, Merid is not optimistic about improving relations between the two groups in Detroit.

Despite its history of racial tensions, Detroit has an opportunity to use the experience of African immigrant and African American relations to broaden perspectives among all racial groups regarding the presence of racial stereotypes and how to address prejudices. If African immigrants resist buying into societal prejudices regarding African Americans – even when those prejudices inure to the benefit of African immigrants – economic and social ties could be fostered. Yet respect is a two-way street: if African Americans treated African immigrants as just another immigrant group and learned to appreciate their history and traditions, better relations might develop.

Importantly, Detroit has the ingredients for African-African American relations to strengthen. The Charles A. Wright Museum of African American History is the leading African American museum in the U.S. and plays a significant role in the exploration by the African American community of its African heritage. The Museum already hosts a number of exhibits and symposia exploring African American history and the roots of racial categorizing. In order to help foster relations between African immigrants and African Americans, the Museum could also convene gatherings of representatives from both groups for honest and direct dialogue about their differences and common ground. In this way, perceptions could be corrected or verified and progress charted so that each

group, even if they continued to value their separateness, could respect and value the other, free from the stereotypes of the dominant society.

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