Transculturality and Perceptions of the Immigrant Other

Transculturality and Perceptions of the Immigrant Other: "From-Heres" and "Come-Heres" in Virginia and North Rhine-Westphalia

Edited by

Cathy Covell Waegner, Page R. Laws
and Geoffroy de Laforcade

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Transculturality and Perceptions of the Immigrant Other:
"From-Heres" and "Come-Heres" in Virginia and North Rhine-Westphalia,
Edited by Cathy Covell Waegner, Page R. Laws and Geoffroy de Laforcade

This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2695-2, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2695-2

Cover photos by Page Laws:
"Star-Spangled Spanglish in Norfolk, Virginia"
and Hanna Waegner:
"Transcultural Kiosk in Cologne, Germany"

Cover design by Christine Plicht

TABLE OF CONTENTS

(Note: The date of last access for all online sources listed in this volume is 30 November 2010)

PREFACE

CATHY C. WAEGNER AND PAGE R. LAWS

> "We've gotta get the border secure; once we do that, then we can address issues with people here illegally."
> —John McCain, Senator from Arizona, 14 October 2010
>
> "The policy of saying 'now we'll try out multi-culti and live beside each other and be happy about each other' has failed, absolutely failed."
> —German Chancellor Angela Merkel, 16 October 2010

These quotations echo (and have amplified) the increasingly strident public debates on immigration and interaction with residents of migrant background in the US and Germany.[1] To address this development, an international, interdisciplinary group of scholars from Norfolk State University, the University of Siegen, and the University of Mainz[2] has undertaken a project partially sponsored by the *Foundation for German-American Academic Relations, (Stiftung Deutsch Amerikanische Wissenschaftsbeziehungen)* based in Essen/Germany. This volume compiles the project findings in a publication we believe will be of interest to both scholars and the general public. The authors focus on the ways in which new diasporic and migrational patterns arouse ill will and conflict, but also negotiation and transculturality, resulting in transformed meso-structures in media, schooling, and business. Investigating regional

[1] Sources of the quotations in the epigraph: "McCain Visits Yuma," *KYMA News*, 14 October 2010. Available online:
<http://www.kyma.com/slp.php?idN=4184&cat=Local%20News>;
"Kanzerlin Merkel hält Multiculti für gescheitert," *Welt Online*, 16 October 2010. Available online:
<http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article10337575/Kanzlerin-Merkel-erklaert-Multikulti-fuer-gescheitert.html> (the translation of the quotation is ours; see the articles in this volume by Engelmann/Nölting and Waegner for discussion of Merkel's statement).

[2] Norfolk State University is an HBCU ("Historically Black College or University") located in Norfolk, Virginia; University of Siegen and University of Mainz are both public institutions in Germany.

immigrant groups in the states of Virginia and North Rhine-Westphalia as well as the discourses and images in public media, films, literature, and cultural events, the studies both document the contest for geographical, work, and community space and place it in larger theoretical and specific historical contexts.

The phrase "from-heres and come-heres" is borrowed from the regional dialect of the Eastern Shore and Northern Neck of Virginia, two relatively isolated peninsulas where the economy is still based on agriculture and the seafood industry. Farmers and watermen who have lived in these areas for generations (and tend to be of English or "Scotch Irish" stock) sometimes refer to the tourists or newcomers who settle there as "*come-heres*" in contrast to themselves as "natives" or "*from-heres*." The nomenclature is useful for discussing immigration because it so directly conjures up a primal tendency for people to form in-groups and out-groups—and to claim superior rights—based on how long they have inhabited a certain territory. Our studies show the relativity of these two terms, however, and the social injustice which very often accompanies them.

Since both the German "Ruhrgebiet" and Hungarian Pécs are *Cultural Capitals of Europe 2010*, one strand in the papers will connect with that axis. Pécs' 2010 motto of "the borderless city" suggests an ideal which—as our studies show—is seldom realized in the perceptions of and by immigrant groups, although protracted transcultural encounters are transforming received notions of ethnicity and ethnic hierarchy in our two test-case regions, Virginia and North Rhine-Westphalia.[3]

The concept of "transculturality" is starting to replace the terms "multiculturality" and "interculturality" in cultural discourse. A chief proponent of "transculturality" is the German theorist Wolfgang Welsch (University of Jena), and scholarly works applying and critiquing his theory are *au courant*. The appeal of a model such as Welsch's which premises permeations, mixes, cultural networkings rather than the clash of differences with stubborn hierarchies is undeniable. The dynamism of *transcultural* processes, the individual's constant choosing of components of affiliation, the on-going hybrid transformations in persons and culture,

[3] Several studies in this volume will focus on the Hampton Roads area in southeastern Virginia, which includes these cities mentioned in our articles: Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Newport News. One study refers to the urbanized environs of Washington DC called "Northern Virginia." North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) is the most populous of the 16 German states. Cologne, it can be argued, is the major cultural center of this state, and Siegen is located in the southeast corner of NRW. The large urban megalopolis in NRW called the "Ruhrgebiet" includes the cities of Essen, Bochum, Dortmund, and Duisburg.

the emphasis on *function* rather than essential features offers the outlook that deep-set forms of prejudice and urgent practical problems can be reduced with an adoption of transcultural attitudes.

This volume is divided into five sections which reflect different components of the original project title: *"From-Heres" and "Come-Heres": Perceptions of the Immigrant Other and Transcultural Encounters.* The articles were presented in different forms at one or more of three venues: a symposium at Norfolk State University in March 2010, a symposium at the University of Siegen in June 2010, or the MESEA (Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas) conference in Pécs/Hungary in June 2010 with the relevant theme of "Travel, Trade, and Ethnic Transformations." The interdisciplinary project group included professors, lecturers, Honors College undergraduates and graduate students in the fields of cultural and (comparative) studies, history, and sociology; empirical fieldwork was enhanced by student participants in seminars taught at both universities. We are certainly grateful to both institutions for their support,[4] as well as to the *Foundation for German-American Academic Relations.*

In section 1, ***Historical Perceptions and "From-Here" Memory***, historian Charles H. Ford (NSU) analyzes a Norfolk African American newspaper's complex coverage of the Haitian "boat people" (1979-1986). Stephanie G. Walker (NSU) draws on postcolonial theory to present the painful school integration process spearheaded by "The Norfolk Seventeen" in 1959 as "internal migration." Sonja Georgi (University of Mainz) turns to two current cultural projects which seek to offer appropriate transcultural homage to traumatic events in Germany's past: the "stumbling stones" placed in front of houses formerly inhabited by Jewish residents and the RUHR 2010/Cultural Capital of Europe installation of a "Square of European Promise" that deconstructs a 1931 war memorial.

Section 2 is called ***Immigration and Citizenship***, and contains a paper by Janine Werner (University of Siegen) on the controversial new German naturalization test and integration courses. Isabel Killough (NSU) considers recent CNN documentaries and other media coverage on the fastest growing group of immigrants to the USA in the light of legal, communal, and personal designations of Hispanic identity. Geoffroy de

[4] Sponsoring organizations connected to those institutions include NSU Honors College New Lyceum Series, Fachbereich 3 of the University of Siegen, the Alison J. and Ella W. Parsons Fund of The Hampton Roads Community Foundation, and Title III. We would also like to thank Christine Plicht, University of Mainz, for her prompt assistance with the graphics for this volume.

Laforcade (NSU), historian of labor, migrations, and transatlantic identity formation, compares the issues of immigration and citizenship in Germany and the US with those in twentieth-century/present-day France.

In the third section, ***Growing Up Other***, Cathy C. Waegner (University of Siegen) presents the results of empirical research at schools in the Siegen and Norfolk areas, as well as analysis of three recent ethnic 'Bildungsroman'-novels, all within the framework of current transculturality theory. The internationally unique, but not uncontroversial, Sinti & Roma high school in Pécs is also included in the discussion. Melanie Jäger (University of Siegen) develops a concept of *dynamic identity* to describe the complicated transcultural affiliations of young-adult German Turks.

Section 4 centers on ***"Come-Heres" at Work***, with Frankie Copeland (NSU) presenting an investigation of ethnic trades, focusing on the career determinants of ethnic niche professionals, notably Asian Indians as convenience store owners or Korean/Vietnamese as 'nail shop' specialists. The positive utilization of social capital (according to Portes and Sensenbrenner: value introjection, reciprocity transaction, bounded solidarity, and enforceable trust) in the rapidly expanding Hispanic-owned businesses in Northern Virginia is examined by the sociologist Robert K. Perkins (NSU).

The final section stresses ***Transcultural Encounters in the Media***. Mita Banerjee (University of Mainz) investigates a controversial Cologne exhibition on migration and two popular television phenomena headquartered in Cologne, all of which possibly mainstream 'blackness'. The new documentary by undercover investigative journalist Günter Wallraff, *Schwarz auf Weiss*, in which Wallraff in "blackface" tests Germany's racial tolerance, is analyzed by Susanne Engelmann and Florian Nölting (both University of Siegen). Finally, exploring the notion of a "cinema of acceptance," Page Laws (NSU) turns to recent American and European films to point out changing perspectives on immigrant Others—especially those branded as "illegal aliens"—in movies created by both newly empowered independent filmmakers and mainstream Hollywood stalwarts such as Clint Eastwood.

Co-editor Geoffroy de Laforcade's epilog, called ***Prospects***, examines how the concept of transculturality weaves together the fabric of the collection's diverse chapters, and outlines its historical and theoretical value for the challenge of rethinking ethnic/racial/national identities in the contemporary global era.

PART I:

HISTORICAL PERCEPTIONS AND "FROM-HERE" MEMORY

CHAPTER ONE

OUR OWN BOAT PEOPLE: THE NORFOLK *JOURNAL AND GUIDE* AND THE HAITIAN REFUGEES, 1979-1986

CHARLES H. FORD
NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Scholars have rarely examined the responses of African Americans to immigrants of color. This paper provides a relevant case study of long-forgotten local controversies that may shed light upon why some immigrants are still deemed much better than others. Especially significant here are the travails of Michèle Bleus and her ultimately successful attempts to bring her son from Haiti to the United States within the context of the exodus caused by the Duvalier dictatorship. Ironically, the Bleus family is currently engaged in a similar struggle to bring relatives to America against the backdrop of the recent devastating earthquake.

American policymakers during the Cold War routinely welcomed political and economic refugees from Communist nations to show the bankrupt nature of that competing ideology. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Cuban boat peoples were welcomed with open arms by American authorities. In contrast, Haitian refugees arriving by boat were routinely harassed, incarcerated, and deported, and their plight was ignored by both the Carter and Reagan administrations, which were intent on keeping their ties with the anti-communist Duvalier regime in Port-au-Prince. African Americans and their leaders, however, protested this double standard in reference to asylum seekers, a distinction which seemed to them in particular to be much more motivated by racial

discrimination than by political ideology. The Norfolk *Journal and Guide*, eastern Virginia's oldest and largest African American weekly, provides a fascinating lens by which to see this debate play out with the designated "Other" being defined in new and surprising ways.[1]

Most interesting was the local case of Michèle Bleus, a middle-class Haitian woman who had immigrated legally to Norfolk in 1974. She had joined her family already in America, after her marriage had failed in Haiti. She was also three months pregnant when she left Haiti and already had a nine-month-old son, Frantz, whom she had left with relatives back on the island. She planned to bring her son to America when she had obtained a job; once she had found employment, though, the authorities both in Port-au-Prince and Washington kept giving her the run-around. Her application for a visa for her son was entangled in red tape and, then, it was drawn into the boat people debate. Even before the *Journal and Guide* published her story in July 1981, however, Congressman G. William Whitehurst, a white Republican hardly known for his liberal racial views, had gone to bat for her, pointing out that she was a 'good' Haitian, unlike those 'bad' Haitian boat people illegally leaving for Florida. The resolution of the case in Bleus's favor ironically tended to strengthen racial and ethnic stereotypes.

Yet, despite the attempts of white officials to co-opt their agenda, local African American leaders were quite insistent on the diasporan links between the boat people and their relatively more privileged black brothers and sisters in Hampton Roads. These historical allusions led to a rare march in solidarity in the port city for an international rather than a domestic cause in November 1982. But, the Haitian cause also provided ready kindling for social justice causes closer to home, such as opposing the ending of court-ordered busing for the integration of public schools.

The *Journal and Guide* refused to join in the stigmatization of Haitians as one of the doomed risk groups for what became known as HIV/AIDS, noting only when Haitians were no longer considered such a category in 1985.[2] Yet it did take an ironically paternalistic tone in coverage toward "its own" Haitian boat people, using them as a foil to show how far black Americans had come and how far that they needed to go in their ongoing fight for legal and social equality. To appreciate the responses of the Norfolk *Journal and Guide* to the plight of Michèle Bleus as well as to the

[1] An early look at this contrast would be "White Cubans, Si; Black Haitians, No: Jewish Congress Cites Bias," *Journal and Guide*, 27 July 1974: 1, 2.
[2] For this quick mention, see "This Week's World Briefs—AIDS Update," *Journal and Guide*, 26 June 1985: 1.

refugees requires a brief look at the historical relationship between Haitians and African Americans.

As Leon D. Pamphile has shown in his recent work, *Haitians and African Americans: A Heritage of Tragedy and Hope*, these connections grew out of the common crucibles of slavery and the consequent struggles for freedom. Haiti began, of course, as the French sugar colony of Saint Domingue, the most lucrative nexus in the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century. Slavery was probably the worst there in terms of treatment and mortality and, thus, when the French Revolution divided the planters from the mother country, the enslaved majority in Saint Domingue under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture seized the moment and eventually won their freedom and independence by 1804. The new nation of Haiti's success was dangerous to the slaveholders of the hemisphere: Britain lost more troops intervening to reimpose slavery in Haiti than they did fighting Napoleon in Europe; the conspiracies of Gabriel Prosser in Richmond and Denmark Vesey in South Carolina had direct Haitian roots. Thus, Haiti was ignored, unrecognized (by the United States until 1865), and forced to compensate France for the loss of its colonial revenue, moves that forever crippled the nation's economy. On the other hand, Haiti became an oasis of liberty for many African Americans seeking a New Jerusalem free of white oppression during the nineteenth century. Significantly, one original stream of immigration was of free and freed American blacks to Haiti, especially during the 1850s when it looked as if slavery was expanding, not dying, on the continent. Relations between Haitians and African Americans grew stronger, of course, after the Civil War with the preeminent African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass being appointed as American minister resident and consul general to Haiti in 1889. While Haiti's political instability and economic underdevelopment in the nineteenth century troubled African American leaders who wanted to see a flourishing democracy with peaceful transitions of power for their own self-empowerment, the Caribbean nation remained a role model of black resistance to white supremacy well into the era of Booker T. Washington and his influential principles of accommodation to racial inequality.

But it was not until Woodrow Wilson's occupation of Haiti that common goals of equality and freedom coalesced to bring together Haitian and African American leaders in opposition to this imperialistic burst of gunboat diplomacy. Ironically, during this period of the great migration northward of African Americans from Southern states, racist whites, both within and outside the Wilson administration, continued to think of Haiti as "a dumping ground" for African Americans to be resettled in order to provide for a truly white and Christian United States. But African

American pressure to end the occupation finally moved the second Roosevelt administration to act, and the next twenty years until the accession of Francois Duvalier in 1957 marked the high point of African American optimism in Haitian potential and prospects, with the Sesquicentennial of Haitian independence in 1954 serving as a platform to celebrate the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision to desegregate American public schools.[3]

The Duvalier era ironically began as an Afrocentric, *noirist* effort to stem the color prejudices and economic concentrations of the American occupation a generation earlier, but it quickly devolved into an especially corrupt and brutal appendage of American imperialism during the Cold War. As the civil rights movement in the United States secured hard-fought gains, Haitian economic dependence and poverty worsened greatly under Papa Doc Duvalier, and, then, after 1971 his hand-picked successor—his son, Baby Doc Duvalier. African American leaders differed on how to respond to the Duvalier dictatorships with many deploring the brutal use of paramilitary units for vigilante injustice yet with some averting their eyes because of the dictatorships' ethnic and historical ties to the African diaspora. Papa Doc symbolically embraced the civil rights movement in his own capital—renaming one of the main streets in Port au Prince after the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968—while crushing any human or civil rights at home. This charade was helped by America's desperate need for allies in its struggle with the Soviet Union in which the enemy of my enemy, however awful, became our official friend. It would not be until the human rights campaign of the Carter administration that the Duvalier regime was forced to defend its sorry record. And only then did it lead to cosmetic and minor reforms that masked the deepening economic catastrophe in the Haitian countryside and Port-au-Prince itself, a catastrophe leading to the "boat people" crisis which brought this problem to American television screens. Reagan's election and his administration's fine distinction between good authoritarian and bad totalitarian regimes emboldened Baby Doc to enact even more repressive measures, which, of course, only made things worse (Pamphile 165-72).

Immigration out of Haiti during the Duvalier era came in spurts reflecting the island nation's social stratification, as Pamphile shows. During the 1960s, as things improved for black peoples in America, Africa, and other parts of the Caribbean, middle-class professionals fled Haiti in a legal, orderly exodus arranged by the regime to get rid of potential political rivals. The United States was one of many destinations

[3] Leon D. Pamphile 3-164. See also West and Martin 72-104.

for these educated immigrants who went on to serve as bureaucrats, businessmen, and teachers from Ghana to Barbados. The second wave—beginning after a severe drought in 1974—was far more diverse, and it contained many more peasants and factory workers who felt that they had no where else to go but to make it to America or surrounding islands by sea. The resulting exodus of Haiti's common people, which reached a high point between 1978 and 1981, numbering up to 20,000 in all, led to many deaths and dramatic rescues, underlining the United States' own racial divides in and on immigration policies. The Reagan administration, if anything, toughened the American stance against accepting this stream of refugees, intercepting leaky vessels of the starving on the ocean and turning them around without giving provisions or medical care. One such encounter led to the deaths of thirty passengers, mostly women, the elderly, and children, in a particularly harrowing episode off Fort Lauderdale as the Coast Guard did nothing and people slowly drowned (Pamphile 174-82).

The Norfolk *Journal and Guide*, for its part, reflected both African American faith and disappointment in Haiti and Haitians. Since its founding in 1900, the *Journal and Guide* had always informed eastern Virginia's black communities of news and opinion that they could never find in the mainstream white newspapers, and news on the developing Haitian refugee crisis was no exception. Under its original ownership, the *Journal and Guide* was considered a conservative voice, but by the 1970s it reflected the mainstream of local African American opinion. Thus, as early as 1972, there were periodic reports of such crossings, almost always sympathetic to the fleeing Haitians.

But it would not be until 1976 that a series of stories in the *Journal and Guide* directly exposed the excesses of the Duvalier regime. Here the most damning piece featured the cancellation of comedian Richard Pryor's plans to shoot a major film in Haiti immediately following nationwide demonstrations by Haitian refugees and expatriates in the United States protesting against a major African American celebrity doing business with "a fascist-ruled country." The article on Pryor went on to catalogue the rapes and murders committed by the Duvalier paramilitaries, many of them done in broad daylight with international observers nearby. "The country is a giant prison camp," as one Haitian expat was quoted. Other contemporaneous articles stressed the petty and arbitrary nature of the current government with its alleged ban on the afro hairstyle and its allowance of white-owned businesses from abroad to purchase land for speculative purposes. The Duvaliers' excesses were particularly egregious given the *Journal and Guide's* past highlighting of Haitian and Haitian

American heroes such as Toussaint L'Ouverture or Pierre Toussaint of New York and Haitian traditions of the past such as native small landholding. During the middle and late 1970s into the 1980s, these heroes and traditions were routinely spotlighted in the weekly newspaper as important shared African American history. The implied message was clear: While Haiti had been inspirational to African Americans in the past, it was time for African Americans to draw upon that shared history to inspire needed changes in Haiti. Nevertheless, the message usually remained implicit, probably bowing to the shared ethnic and historical traditions that apologists for the Duvaliers drew upon, too. It is true, though, that that message grew much blunter as the dictatorship and its excesses grew unashamedly brutal. There seemed to be a slow realization at the *Guide* that the diasporan links in the wrong hands became as silencing or as limiting as the white power structures that they were designed to replace.[4]

Nevertheless, while the *Journal and Guide* implicitly criticized the regime, it explicitly, like other black newspapers nationwide, deplored the American double standard of accepting lighter-skinned immigrants from Communist countries while turning back the darker-skinned boat people. "Unlike the 25,000 Cuban refugees who were officially welcomed, encouraged, and even sent for by a flotilla of privately-owned U.S. boats last month," one journalist opined, the Haitians were turned away "like pests." The *Journal and Guide* attributed this disparity to racism and U.S. business and tourism interests in Haiti which catered to the Duvalier regime and vice-versa. Cheap labor and staunch diplomatic support rounded out the causes for Haitian refugees to be scorned and others to be embraced, but racism accentuated the bad treatment for the peasants fleeing the island nation. Even Nicaraguans fleeing Somoza or Iranians fleeing the Shah were not treated this badly. A 25 June 1980 article did note the blanket refusal to admit Haitians, even those who were not boat

[4] For early positive reviews of the Duvalier regimes, see "Handy Haitians Attract Tourists," *Journal and Guide*, 26 September 1970: B1; "Papa Doc Duvalier," *Journal and Guide*, 1 May 1971: A10; "Haitian President Invites Visitors," *Journal and Guide*, 13 January 1973: 11. For Pryor and his foiled plans, see "Haiti's 'Politics' Burns Actor Pryor," *Journal and Guide*, 22 May 1976: 10. See also "Haiti Frowns On Afro Hair Style," *Journal and Guide*, 31 January 1976: 14; Alfreda L. Madison, "Bribes and Payoffs," *Journal and Guide*, 20 March 1976: 8. For an example of historical blurbs referencing famous Haitians, see "Editorial Cartoon 1—No Title," *Journal and Guide*, 21 September 1979: 8. For the newspaper's sharpest criticism of the Haitian regime, see "Dismantle the Duvalier Dynasty," *Journal and Guide*, 9 December 1981: 8.

people and who, ten years before, might have immigrated quietly without any fuss.[5]

Yet, the *Journal and Guide* had its own double standard when it came to Haitian coverage. While other individual stories were given short shrift by the black weekly, the Bleus controversy probably received official attention in part because Ms. Bleus was relatively lighter-skinned, middle-class, and employed. Michèle Bleus's situation became public with the article by Kitabu Turner in the *Guide*: "Haitian Mother Struggles To Have Son With Her." As previously mentioned, Michèle Bleus had immigrated "through normal channels" in 1974. She went on to Tidewater Community College to study music, taking up the classical harp. But she left school for work because she needed to show the immigration authorities that she could provide for her children. She ended up working as a security guard. She thus had a bank account and enough insurance to show that she could be a good mother and provider. The American Embassy, however, consistently rejected her paperwork for one reason or the other. Once, she was asked about her babysitter's credentials. When she said that her babysitter was her mother, then they wanted to know if her mother was gainfully employed. When her mother subsequently died, this merry-go-round about the babysitter's credentials went around again. Michèle said that her son Frantz was developing emotional problems, crying all the time for his mother. On a trip to Haiti nearly a year before her plight became public, she flew in to see Frantz and her relatives only to be given the brush-off by the American Consul in Haiti, Muriel Moore, whom she went to in order to plead her case. Congressman Whitehurst then wrote a letter and was told the Consul's office that it would be taken care of in a month. That was in January 1981, but the story did not break until 8 July 1981. Michèle confidently told Kitabu Turner of the *Guide* that she would continue to do her own "shuttle diplomacy" until she was reunited with her son in America.[6]

Media and public support for Ms. Bleus in Hampton Roads largely followed local color lines. James O. Mills of WAVY-TV 10 was one of her strongest advocates, and he happened to be the first and only African American director of a local station's television news.[7] In contrast,

---

[5] "Protest Hits Haitian Refugee Double Standard," *Journal and Guide*, 25 June 1980: B5. See also the published letter to the editor of Alfred Baker Lewis from Riverside, Connecticut in *Journal and Guide*, 9 November 1979: 8.

[6] Kitabu V. Turner, "Haitian Mother Struggles To Have Son Here With Her," *Journal and Guide*, 8 July 1981: 1, 2.

[7] For Mills, see "James Mills Has Something to Prove: Eased Out of College—He Made Good in TV," *Journal and Guide*, 5 October 1974: 13.

promised support from the *Virginian-Pilot* and its neighborhood news supplement—the *Compass*—never materialized, even though the *Pilot* devoted much space to Cambodian and Ukrainian children caught up in immigration struggles throughout the summer of 1981.[8] Sympathetic black church leaders added their vocal support; this chorus featured the Reverend (Elder) A.D. Wright of Macedonia United Church of Christ and the entire 2,000-plus strong congregation of Third Baptist Church in nearby Portsmouth. Yet, most key black churches and ministers in the port city seemed strangely silent and, more predictably, there were no recorded responses to Michèle's plight from local white churches and ministers.[9]

The most effective voice, however, came from an unexpected corner: the office of Republican Congressman W. William Whitehurst, a former history professor and dean at what is now Old Dominion University. Whitehurst actually sent two letters, the most persuasive of which was mailed after the *Guide* story broke. His letters did not survive; copies were carelessly thrown out by archivists at Washington and Lee University in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, the public comments of Whitehurst's aide, Rena Wasserman, do give some clues as to why the Congressman stepped in so forcefully. According to Wasserman, "the fact that Michèle Bleus is Haitian (black) does not have any bearing on the length of time she has been attempting to get her son out of Haiti." Wasserman did find the Consul's haughty refusal to meet with Michèle "unethical," but the aide did not criticize the preferred status for eastern Europeans and Russians escaping to the United States from behind the Iron Curtain. Rather, to Wasserman, it was the human suffering of a mother separated from a child that had stirred the Congressman to act.[10] With Whitehurst's second letter spurring an impromptu letter campaign to the Consul, the foreordained and somewhat stage-managed happy ending came on 21 August 1981 with coverage the following week in Kitabu Turner's "Haitian Child Joins Mother in America."[11]

---

[8] For an example of the *Pilot*'s support of other types of refugees, see Marvin Leon Lake, "Life Begins in Freedom Country," *Virginian-Pilot*, 19 July 1981: B1.

[9] Kitabu V. Turner, "Haitian Mother Gains Support," *Journal and Guide*, 29 July 1981: 2, 3. However, one of the social clubs at historic and influential First Baptist Church, Bute Street, was sponsoring a Haitian child at the time of the Bleus controversy. See Alfreda James, "Norfolk's Oldest Black Church," *Journal and Guide*, 8 July 1981: 10.

[10] Kitabu V. Turner, "Haitian Mother Gains Support," *Journal and Guide*, 29 July 1981: 2, 3.

[11] Kitabu V. Turner, "Haitian Child Joins Mother In America," *Journal and Guide*, 26 August 1981: 1, 2.

Helping Ms. Bleus did not stop the *Journal and Guide*'s use of the "boat people" trope in local issues and controversies. The efforts of the Reverend C. M. Rodgers in Norfolk to help unemployed locals affected by the worst recession since the 1930s were labeled "Rodgers Finds Boat People in Norfolk." This particular article from 30 April 1980 suggests that the term "boat people" could be used to describe any poor person internally displaced by poverty, exclusion, and despair. Another example would be the inclusion of the plight of the Haitian refugees in relatively rare public protests in the port city against perceived backsliding against civil rights gains of the last generation. The best attended protest happened in downtown Norfolk in November 1982; many of its forty or so participants would go on to join the much more impressive and famous local march in support of busing for public school integration in May 1983, an event which starred none other than the Reverend Jesse Jackson himself.[12]

Sympathy and solidarity with the boat people were always at a studied distance in the newspaper's pages. While a chosen few of the many Haitian refugees would be routinely welcomed in Hampton Roads during the early Reagan era, the collective plight of the nameless and penniless strangers had to compete with other more pressing priorities at home such as dealing with the recession mentioned above.[13] Despite that seeming indifference, Diana Chappell and Patrick Eustace, among others, raised money for the local Haitian Refugee Task Force, a short-lived attempt at coordinating local relief efforts.[14] Yet not even the Task Force could help 23-year-old Belinor Janvier, a Newport News shipyard worker and a refugee from Haiti who missed an immigration deadline and was quickly deported in the spring of 1983, despite the very real dangers that he faced going back to face the Duvalier regime. Unlike Michèle Bleus, he was not a mother, he was darker-skinned, and he was "uneducated."[15]

---

[12] "Families Need Help: Rodgers Finds Boat People In Norfolk," *Journal and Guide*, 30 April 1980: 11. For the protest in 1982, see "March For Haitian Refugees," *Journal and Guide*, 10 November 1982: 1. For direct links between advocacy on behalf of Haitian refugees and later activism, see Mark C. Helfer, "Registration Drive Begins in Norfolk," *Journal and Guide*, 15 February 1984: 1.

[13] Sharon Riddick, "Task Force Welcomes Haitians to Norfolk," *Journal and Guide*, 22 September 1981: 1; "Ecumenism Calls Black Church to Action," *Journal and Guide*, 6 October 1982: 17.

[14] "Haitian Refugee Task Force Plans Raffle, Flea Market," *Journal and Guide*, 6 October 1982: 2.

[15] Michèle Saunders, "Court Orders Return of Haitian Refugee," *Journal and Guide*, 23 March 1983: 1; Michèle Saunders, "Haitian Refugee Deported," *Journal and Guide*, 6 April 1983: 1.

Yet, there may have been other factors dampening diasporan enthusiasm for the Haitian cause. In the eyes of local blacks, the boat people in the early 1980s were further stigmatized by belonging to highly mobile, high-risk groups thought to be the carriers and victims of what would become known as HIV/AIDS: homosexual men, intravenous drug users, hemophiliacs, and Haitians. The black press' avoidance of HIV/AIDS in the beginning of the pandemic, which coincided with the refugee crisis, had to do with the fact that the first public faces of the disease tended to be well-to-do gay white men, not poor Haitian refugees. The *Journal and Guide*'s selective sympathy for Ms. Bleus and its silence over other individual cases may have stemmed from the paper's strong ties with local black churches, known for their stodgy social conservatism (cf. Pamphile 182).

Selective silences, resulting from lingering shame, however, apparently even affected Ms. Bleus and her family's response to her brief 'fifteen minutes' of fame. According to her son Frantz, now the grown-up owner of a private investigation firm in Miami, his mother never talked about her ordeal ever again, and her relatives also shielded the young Frantz from the frustrating details. In fact, he did not know about the whole controversy until coming across the online abstract of this paper while conducting internet research in the wake of the recent earthquake and catastrophe that hit Haiti early in the New Year of 2010. He said that finding out about her persistence and grit made him love her that much more, and he gave me the gift of a detailed update: Michèle moved her family back to Haiti for one year and then permanently relocated to Miami in 1985. She worked at the University of Miami's AIDS Research Center and eventually became a counselor; she also waged her own highly public fight against breast cancer in the 1990s, winning several community service awards. She eventually died on 16 January 2002, of breast cancer, but not before seeing her children become productive American citizens. Frantz concluded his letter to me by saying that he is facing the same bureaucratic inertia that his mother faced in the 1970s in trying to bring relatives out of Haiti and into the United States. He found his own situation very discouraging, until he discovered his mother's story. It is indeed ironic that persistent ethnic and gender-related stigmas—long after the Cold War has ended and the Duvaliers have fled—may still hold up legal attempts at immigration from Haiti to the United States.[16]

[16] Frantz Bleus to Charles H. Ford, email, 16 February 2010.

Works Cited

Pamphile, Leon D. *Haitians and African Americans: A Heritage of Tragedy and Hope*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001.

West, Michael O. and William G. Martin, "Haiti, I'm Sorry: The Haitian Revolution and the Forging of the Black International." In *From Toussaint to Tupac: The Black International since the Age of Revolution.* Ed. Michael O. West, William G. Martin, and Fanon Che Wilkins. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009: 72-104.

Articles from the Norfolk *Journal and Guide* and the *Virginian-Pilot* are indicated in bibliographical detail in the footnotes.

CHAPTER TWO

SCHOOL INTEGRATION AS INTERNAL IMMIGRATION: THE JOURNEY OF THE NORFOLK SEVENTEEN

STEPHANIE G. WALKER
NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled to integrate public schools, creating a socio-political upheaval that challenged the "imagined communities" of blacks and whites, although whites' views of blacks as "the lesser beings" persisted. Tremendous anxiety developed as the entrenched hegemonic practices were questioned, overturning the centuries-old constructions of "self" and "other." Even Virginia's governor defied the federal courts and shut down six of Norfolk's all-white schools instead of accepting black students. Undaunted, the Norfolk Seventeen remained steadfast—seventeen black children entering previously all-white terrain—to traverse alien cultural, political, and geographical boundaries in a kind of interior immigration.

Every nation forges a cultural identity that suggests a unity of self expressed in its statehood. Historically, the collective self, or the "we" in that identity has tended to meld into singular representations that have often remained unchallenged until opposition such as the Civil Rights Movement or the Women's Movement shatters the seemingly immutable national self-image. Rooted in a past marked by a feverish pursuit of racially purity, the falsely constructed homogeneity suggests a univocal selfhood comprised of one ethnicity. The monolithic representation of the privileged mainstream groups has served to exclude and even to erase the cultural identities of all others. In nations that are culturally diverse, the

spurious sense of a solitary racial identity fosters a discontent that is generally contained through a forceful imperialistic domination of a subordinate group by another more powerful group. Through repeated patterns of domination and subordination that echo practices of the colonizer and the colonized, control can be maintained. Ultimately, though, the old categories of superior/inferior and powerful/powerless erode, giving way to the emerging exigencies that seek to subvert the former paradigms.

In the history of the United States, the past urgencies that had once directed a homogenizing and simultaneously hierarchical power structure began to lose their force in the wake of a reconstituted United States after the Civil War in the 19th century, and the crisis of subjectivity overturned itself in the face of a newly negotiated social structure. The fixed categories that created clear bifurcations between classes and races began to dissipate under the mounting pressures that sought an equal status for the former colonizer and his colonized subject. In the case of the United States, a result of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 was that Blacks presented Whites with a problem of identity–one in which each group was to be considered equal in fact, not just in an illusory form.

Complicating the U.S. racial issue was—and perhaps still is—the problematic practice of an imagined history that claims a transcultural memory which exists only in the minds of those whom such a constructed memory serves. In that memory, racial harmony exists where in reality there is/was none. The façade perpetuated by the culturally dominant, i.e., Whites, has traditionally eclipsed the need held by those relegated to the position of "Other," a need for a comfortable cultural context within which those who had been marginalized could forge an identity outside the one proscribed by the majority. The questions of where and how, and indeed even *if*, the "Other" were to reconcile the social and political differences, vexed the public consciousness and conscience. Among the most salient of the issues was the need for public recognition of the marginalized group as having its own discrete cultural identity. The failed constitutional promises that proffered a pluralistic, multicultural nationhood languished under the diluted homogeneity of American social structure and politics. Centuries-old hegemonic practices sullied the American moral consciousness that imagined racial harmony.

In lieu of equanimity between the races, pressures were exerted on African Americans to remove all traces of cultural markers that denoted their differences from Whites while Blacks were summarily denied privileges accorded to Whites. W.E.B. Du Bois's notions regarding duality in the African American psyche perniciously rang true as Blacks continued

to be simultaneously pressured into assimilation while they were concomitantly mired in a landscape of intolerance. The attempts of the oppressed to realize the social and political goals reverberate in Stuart Hall's observations regarding post-Enlightenment grand narratives that bypass "decentered cultural connections, movements and migrations which make up the world today" (248). Hall adds that, "[p]erhaps we should have been warned by other theoretical examples, where the deconstruction of core concepts [are] undertaken" and in which "'[t]he subject' and 'identity' are only two of the concepts which, having been radically undermined in their unitary and essentialist form," transform positions of power (248). However, the ensuing cultural clashes eventually erupted into racial violence as a result of the tensions arising from the conflict between the idealized desire for cultural purity and the reality of a nation comprised of diverse ethnicities. Imperialistic nations around the world were forced to face the lingering effects of their domineering ways, and by the 1950s, similar pressures mounted in America.

Public institutions, ranging from governmental agencies to schools and colleges, continued to collude in the oppressive colonizer mentality leveled at various marginalized groups. Among the many groups subjected to subaltern status was the Black community, and while so many other groups languished under the despotic practices of colonial rule handed down through an autocratic historical legacy, the residual effects of slavery impacted African Americans in a way no other ethnic group experienced. Citizens who had theretofore been denied their citizenship within their own country and who had been alienated from their inalienable rights had had enough. No longer would Black Americans accept the oppressive paternalistic politics of White America that sought to exclude and deny African Americans what their White counterparts freely enjoyed. Homi Bhabha describes such processes as modes "of negation that [seek] … to manipulate … representation" (121).

Tensions boiled over, and as African Americans increasingly demanded their rights, White America trembled at the thought of a restructured social system in which desegregation erased the comfortable and familiar boundaries that delineated the color line. However, by 1954, the American Supreme Court ruled in the landmark case of *Brown vs. the Board of Education (of the City of Topeka, Kansas)*, mandating an end to segregated school systems. In the wake of that decision, several White communities mounted a campaign of massive resistance in an attempt to impede the newly-passed federal laws that required schools to desegregate. Several Virginians, including the Virginia governor, continued to defy the ruling for a number of years until the courts forced the Norfolk public school system

Fig. 2-1 *The Norfolk 17 on their "internal migration"*
Source: <http://www.chrysler.org/press/images/Norfolk17.jpg>

to admit the first Black students to what had previously been all-White schools. This group of Negro students would later become known as "The Norfolk 17," a nomenclature applied to indicate the final 17 applicants who remained out of an initial pool of 151 African American students seeking admission to the more privileged White school system (*School Desegregation).*

This process of integration undertaken by these students and their families bears a striking resemblance to the experience of the colonized subject and the immigrant "Other," an experience marked by a similar sense of rejection and alienation, or as sociologists term it, an exclusion from the *in group* and a relegation to the *out group*. As is often true in the case of immigrants who cluster in interior colonies that are divided by cultural and linguistic boundaries, members of Norfolk's Black community were restricted from areas that were physically, socially, and financially accessible to Whites only. Also like the colonized subject, African Americans found themselves forced into liminal cultural pockets that further insulated them from the mainstream population, effectively creating a void or lacuna in educational opportunities, and in some cases, fostering illiteracy. Thus circumscribed by the oppressive conditions of racism, the delineations of cultural bounds proscribed African Americans to a status akin to that of the immigrant—a status in which Black citizens of 1950s America were viewed as the indecipherable alien Other, the unwelcome interlopers who struggled to mesh cultures while trying to maintain some sense of their own indigenous identity.

In many cases, even more difficult than the immigrant's successful negotiation of a process of *immigration into* the country is the mirrored interior process of *integration within* the country. The ingress of the Black students towards the in-group social strata of White society echoes from within this interior migration, bearing a striking parallel to the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized. As was the case for the Norfolk 17 and most African Americans, the interior journey towards equality proved to be painful and protracted. Only after having been in America for over three hundred years were Black Americans finally permitted to complete the last phase of an immigration process that had started as far back as 1619: the long awaited steps towards integration.

Despite the inclination towards "massive resistance"—the term used to describe the movement led by Whites in an effort to fight desegregation—by 1959 Virginia could no longer ignore the 1954 mandate to integrate. What ensued in the wake of that decision was a socio-political upheaval that challenged the "imagined communities" of Blacks and Whites in 1950s pre-civil rights America. Sustained by notions of dominant ideologies and dominant discourse, segregation continued to inculcate imperialistic ideas that enforced epistemic control from within. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin note in *The Empire Writes Back*, in the formation of imperial power, "all relationships are essentially rigid and hierarchical, reinforced by symbols, ritual, and tradition" in a structure that ultimately "passes … finally to all lesser beings" (100), and in the view of many Whites, Blacks were indeed, "the lesser beings." These sentiments of superiority, coupled with the vestiges of the notions of a master race, created a fear of miscegenation or any other form of cross-cultural contamination. True to an imperialistic culture that seeks ascendancy and control, White America insinuated itself as inheritor of the rights of power in the modality of the superior/subservient role, conscripting Blacks to the role of "other/outsider" marked by alienation and oppression.

Ultimately, this sense of alienation exacerbated the social, political, and geographical boundaries of segregation, forcing an urban social movement in which Blacks sought the power so long denied them. Paul Gilroy describes a similar racial problem faced by Britain wherein race became "a marker for the activity of urban social movements and their conflict with urban political systems and state institutions" (409). He adds that "[t]hese new movements may challenge the mode of production and struggle for control of the ways in which a society appropriates scarce resources, but this is not their primary orientation" (405). For Norfolk's Black community, the scarce resources included updated textbooks, suitable buildings, and an equal chance to provide their children with a

quality education. The push for improved educational resources became emblematic of a deeper, more troubling disparity reflective of deep social and racial divisions. In effect, the efforts to de-segregate represented a broader attempt "for the reappropriation of the material structure of production, but also for collective control over socio-economic development as a whole" (Gilroy 405). The tide of social change was gaining momentum, and the former hold that Whites retained on Blacks had begun to weaken. The "colored folk" or "Negroes" had grown tired of the oppressive colonizer mentality, and their "social movements … [emphasized] that they [were] … symptoms of resistance to domination" having "their roots in a radical sense of powerlessness" (Gilroy 411).

For years following the Supreme Court ruling, Virginia, as well as a number of other states, evaded the question of integration. However, by 1958, Federal District Judge Walter E. Hoffman ordered Norfolk's then all-White schools to end their policy of exclusion with the admission of the hand-selected seventeen Black students to what had previously been the sacrosanct domain of Whites. Anxiety developed as the entrenched hegemonic practices were challenged and boundaries were crossed, overturning the centuries-old constructions of "Self" and "Other." The possibility of racial mixing became problematic at several levels for many members of the White community. Not the least of the fears included the angst surrounding the implication for "these 'hybrid' forms" whose "very presence disrupt[ed] the apparently axiomatic" system of signification "which … invested itself with absolute authority over those it … constructed as 'Other'" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 103). In other words, the lines of demarcation between the Black and White communities were dissolving, and with them went the tangential differentiations between Whites and Blacks, Self and Other.

Key to sustaining these notions of difference was a practice that traced back to slavery itself: the practice of separating Blacks and Whites by limiting educational resources and linguistic access. From the time of their arrival upon American soil, indeed from the time of their forced boarding of the slave ships in mixed language groups, slaves and their descendants were isolated from their native tongue, effectively separating them from their perceptions of the world and their ordered constructions of reality. All but silenced, these men and women found themselves forced to learn the master's tongue without the benefit of formal education, relegating them to a linguistic stigma of "Other" or less. As such, they were subjected to the violence of language which transmogrified into the point of signification that bore the marker of difference, and for one whose speech patterns placed him or her outside the dominant discourse, the task