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Making Americans: Schooling, Diversity, and Assimilation in the Twenty-First Century



CRISTINA L. LASH

How do schools teach American identity in light of immigration-driven diversity? This ethnographic study focuses on everyday nation-making at Castro Middle School, located in a city transformed by immigration. Building on theories of bidirectional assimilation, I show how assimilation can produce new definitions of Americanness more recognizable to immigrant communities, facilitating their national identification. At Castro, bidirectional assimilation supported African American students' descriptions of Americans in multi-cultural terms and their own identification as American. Assimilation between the school and the larger Latino and Asian student populations, however, was limited because of a binary racial paradigm that excluded them from the national community. This study thus nuances the role of race as a barrier in the assimilation process, particularly as it unfolds in schools.

Keywords: assimilation, immigration, national identity, American identity, school diversity

For the past thirty years, the United States has witnessed the highest rates of immigration to the country since the late nineteenth century, the current wave consisting primarily of immigrants from Latin America and South and East Asia. The result is that nearly a quarter of all students in U.S. classrooms are either immigrants or children of immigrants, many of whom speak a language other than English at home (Gándara 2013). The fastest-growing group is Latino school-age children, of whom 8 percent are foreign born, 52 percent are U.S. born with immigrant parents, and 40 percent

are part of the third-plus generation of Latino Americans (Ruggles et al. 2017).¹ These demographic and cultural shifts have raised new questions about the role of schools in the Americanization process. Specifically, how do schools teach American identity in the context of immigration-driven diversity?

The details of how schools “make” nationals have been remarkably undertheorized within the sociology of education literature (Waldinger 2007), despite the prominent role of schools in the Americanization process (for exceptions, see Banks 2008; Olsen 2000). Yet

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1. Author's calculations based on the American Community Survey 2016 sample.

such analyses are increasingly imperative as the changing demographics of the nation have become a source of growing conflict across the country. The current political climate shows a rise in white nativism and hate crimes against immigrants, people of color, Muslims, and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) members, including a significant spike in the days immediately following the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States on November 8, 2016 (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2016; Miller and Werner-Winslow 2016). On top of already fierce debates and protests over the ethnic content of the U.S. history curriculum, such as in Arizona and Texas in 2010 and in Colorado in 2014, the recent rise in national intergroup conflict points to the challenge facing schools to teach American identity within a demographically and culturally shifting nation, and the need for research to examine these dynamics in context.²

This article thus focuses on the everyday ways that schools teach middle school students what it means to be American in the context of immigration-driven diversity and presents findings from an ethnographic study of Castro Middle School, a diverse school in a city profoundly shaped by immigration. It reveals how American nationals and foreigners are “made” at Castro through direct classroom instruction, school events and programming, and daily interactions between peers, teachers, and staff.

The findings illustrate how efforts to reduce the ethnic distance between schools and their minority student populations may be explained as a process of two-way assimilation, whereby both mainstream institutions and immigrant communities undergo ethnic change and become more alike (Alba and Nee 2003; Jiménez 2017). Through this process of assimilation, a social context emerges in which a “true American” includes the cultural attributes of particular ethnic minority groups, facilitating the national identification of minority students and their definition of *American* in multicul-

tural terms. Race, however, remains a significant barrier in the assimilation process (Portes and Zhou 1993). At Castro, the staff’s desire to reproduce a multicultural nation was significantly limited by a black-white racial binary paradigm in which race and diversity were conceived almost exclusively in terms of blacks and whites (Perea 1997). Thus, although Castro staff consciously reduced the ethnic distance between the school and their small African American population, they did little to reduce the ethnic distance with their much larger Latino and Asian student populations, limiting the process of bidirectional assimilation.

SCHOOLING, ASSIMILATION, AND NATION-MAKING

According to the political scientist Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, national members are able to recognize each other based on social boundaries that define the prototypical or core national (2009; see also Miller 1995). These social boundaries are often based on ascriptive characteristics, including race, ethnicity, and language (Theiss-Morse 2009; Smith 1991; Anderson 1983), but may also be based on more civic attributes and political beliefs, such as liberalism and individualism (Smith 1991; Smith 1997). This mutual recognition is necessary for nationals to believe they belong together as a group, though they will never meet most of their compatriots (see also Anderson 1983). As the political theorist David Miller notes, “nations are not aggregates of people distinguished by their physical or cultural traits, but communities whose very *existence* depends upon mutual recognition” (1995, 23, emphasis added). How nationals imagine the social boundaries of the national community often influences which people or groups receive the full benefits and protections of the state and full rights of membership within the national polity (Anderson 1983). Yet the existing literature on national identity has done little to explain how children learn the boundaries of the nation in the first place or the social processes

2. In 2010 in Tucson, Arizona, protesters fought a ban on ethnic studies curriculum. Marches and rallies in Austin, Texas, the same year similarly opposed the school board’s decision to change ethnic content in the U.S. history curriculum. In 2014 in Denver, Colorado, debates and protests ensued over the school board decision to limit topics in U.S. history that emphasized race, class, and ethnicity, which were argued to be un-American.

that lead to eventual national identification, including assimilation.

Assimilation is, in fact, a process of ethnic change whereby “foreigners” become nationals even as the characteristics of a national may change (Waldinger 2003, 2007). Moreover, the image of the core national in large part directs both the Americanization and assimilation processes for minority and immigrant groups.

Classic theories of assimilation have treated it as a process of cultural subtraction, whereby the ethnic elements of the individual are stripped away and replaced with Anglo European cultural and linguistic norms (Gordon 1964; Park and Burgess 1921; Donato 1997). Indeed, the common school movement led by Horace Mann in the late nineteenth century was in many ways designed to assimilate European immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Italy, and Poland into a common American culture, and to make American citizens who would serve the new republic (Tyack 1967; Labaree 1997). These European immigrants were eventually racialized as white as social acceptance in antebellum America became defined by a shared hatred toward and distance from African Americans (Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991). As the boundaries of the American mainstream became more defined by whiteness, these boundaries were enforced through structural racism in American institutions, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Jim Crow policies of the South, and the segregated “Mexican schools” of the American Southwest.

The early assimilation scholars Robert Park and Ernest Burgess believed that race, and specifically whiteness, determined who was able to assimilate into a common American culture and who was not (1921). Although assimilation was seen as fully possible for white ethnic groups, it was (at best) only partially possible for nonwhite groups, including African Americans and the Japanese. Latinos were also viewed as racial outsiders who would never blend into the mainstream (Donato 1997). Later theories of assimilation emerging in the mid- and late twentieth century—including those forwarded by Milton Gordon (1964) and Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993)—similarly described the core group (or upwardly mobile sector) of American society as white and

middle-class, and it was into this culture that immigrants were presumed to assimilate. Notably, these theories share the assumption that the boundaries of the American mainstream are normative and based on roughly the same ethnocultural features, rather than socially constructed and contested (Anderson 1983). Only the immigrant community is presumed to undergo cultural change as it moves toward a fixed point of Americanness.

Sociologists have recently shifted on this point, suggesting a more dynamic construction of the nation that is shaped by both immigrant communities and the host society (Alba and Nee 2003; Jiménez 2017). Richard Alba and Victor Nee, for example, argue that assimilation is a bidirectional process of ethnic change experienced by both the host society and the immigrant community, leading to an overall decline of ethnic distinction (2003). Rather than presume that the mainstream is fixed as white or middle class, the authors suggest that bidirectional assimilation takes into account changes made within mainstream institutions (such as schools, organizations, churches) as they also evolve toward a common culture with ethnic minorities. Yet Alba and Nee do not develop national identity as an independent construct within their conceptual model. Although they describe how immigrants become part of and eventually change the American mainstream, they do not distinguish between the mainstream (defined primarily by the dominant group) and the imagined national community (Waldinger 2003). Tomás Jiménez similarly describes assimilation as a relational (or give and take) process of cultural change between the host society and immigrant community over time, but adds that the host society has changed their understanding of American national identity as a consequence of long-term immigration (2017). Still, this research leaves open the question of whether these shifts in national perceptions are shared by immigrants and their descendants, or how these new perceptions of Americanness shape their national identification.

This research thus provides an important conceptual bridge between assimilation theory and social theories of national identity. I argue that through this process of relational or two-

way assimilation between immigrant communities and the host society, the social boundaries of the nation may change and a new definition of a core national (or “true American”) may emerge that is more similar to immigrant communities. This new image of an American is also more recognizable to immigrant groups, thus allowing them to more easily see themselves as fellow members of the national community and identify as American. This article focuses on the interrelated processes of assimilation and national identity formation within the context of schools—key nationalizing institutions. My analysis highlights the specific mechanisms of assimilation within schools that allow for this mutual recognition to occur (or not), and how these processes shape students’ national identification.

Education scholars have previously analyzed assimilation as a process of change occurring only among immigrants and their descendants (Ogbu and Simons 1998; Brown 2004; Yoon, Simpson, and Haag 2010), rather than as bidirectional change with the host society. Moreover, critical scholars within education have strongly critiqued assimilation because of its long association with ethnic erasure and positioning whiteness and standard English as the cultural norm (Ladson-Billings 1999; Valenzuela 1999). What has been missing is an analysis of how, over time, schools can also undergo ethnic change to become more like the minority communities they serve.

The closest theories that describe a cross-fertilization between student and school cultures come from the scholarship on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) and critical multicultural education (CME) (Ladson-Billings 1995, 1999; Sleeter 2012). CRT and CME are paradigms that construct racially and ethnically marginalized students as valuable contributors of knowledge whose diverse experiences are assets to student learning. CRT and CME also have an explicit antiracism, social justice agenda that prioritizes equity and inclusion in school programming and structures. One of the underlying assumptions of CRT is the belief that the degree of ethnocultural mismatch (or ethnic distance) between students and their teachers, curriculum, and school culture profoundly influences student achievement, mo-

tivation, and sense of belonging at their school. Despite the lack of any specific blueprint for how teachers should reduce this ethnic distance, as they are expected to tailor their instruction to the identities of the children in their seats, a primary focus of CRT and CME has been to provide diverse students with access to a range of multicultural curricula and academic learning tools that reflect their cultural identities.

Staff efforts to reduce the ethnic distance with their students—for example, through CRT, hiring teachers of similar ethnic backgrounds to the students, or having school assemblies to celebrate the accomplishments of various ethnic groups—are, in fact, indicators of bidirectional assimilation between the students and their schooling institution, resulting in an overall decline of ethnic distinction. By reconceptualizing such school practices through the lens of assimilation, the link between these practices and the emergence of new models of Americanness within schools comes into clearer focus.

Although CRT assumes that schools will be responsive to the ethnic and cultural identities of students within the local context, some evidence indicates that school reform since the civil rights era has predominately focused on the experiences of African Americans, giving far less attention to the incorporation of other racial groups, including Latino and Asian subgroups (Donato 1997). The education historian Rubén Donato argues that the experience of African Americans and their struggle for civil rights has dominated U.S. historical memory and often serves as the frame of reference for current discussions in education reform (1997). Thus, Latinos and Asians are largely left out of the historical record of civil rights, erasing the agency of these communities in desegregation and advocacy for bilingual education and culturally appropriate curriculum. According to the legal scholar Juan Perea, these historical omissions are evidence of a black-white racial binary paradigm that dominates the racial discourse within the United States (1997). In this paradigm, race in America is constructed primarily or exclusively in terms of blacks and whites. It limits the sets of problems that may be recognized in racial discourse, and creates

significant distortions in the way people learn to view Latinos and Asians, including perpetuating negative stereotypes. The relative absence of Latino and Asian subgroups from local histories and U.S. history curriculum further relegates the contributions and longtime struggles of these communities to insignificance and, ultimately, leaves teachers with fewer resources to apply CME to a wider range of cultural identities (Menchaca 1995; Oboler 1997; Yosso 2002).

At Castro Middle School, a black-white racial paradigm among the staff limited their ability to reproduce the image of a multicultural nation among students and incorporate Latino and Asian-Pacific Islanders at the school. The staff described their use of CRT and multicultural education as guided by their desire to celebrate national diversity, promote tolerance and inclusion, and recognize injustice on the basis of race, income, and sexuality. Yet, in practice, the staff framed racial diversity as almost exclusively blacks and whites. Thus, although educators reduced the ethnic distance between the school and their small African American student population, they did not assimilate with the much larger Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander population. The findings further reveal that where Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander students were not provided a model of Americanness that was recognizable to them (that is, reflected their racial, ethnic, or linguistic identity), these students commonly defaulted to the hegemonic definition of American as white and English monolingual.

METHODOLOGY

Drawing from prior research on national identity, I operationalized the construct of national identity to include values and beliefs (such as democracy and individualism), cultural practices and traditions (such as holidays and festivals), ethnoracial and linguistic boundaries (how nationals distinguish themselves from foreigners based on ethnic, racial, and linguistic categories), and common myths and heroes (such as famous battles and political leaders) (Smith 1991; Theiss-Morse 2009).

To document the everyday practices of nation-making in schools, I conducted seven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Castro Middle School during the 2014–2015 school year (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).³ I selected Castro for its geographic location in Bridgeview, a city in California that has been dramatically transformed by immigration. Between 1970 and 1990, Bridgeview changed from a predominantly white working-class city with a small African American population to a primary destination for immigrant families from Latin America and Asia. By 2010, its Latino population had grown to 40 percent, and Asians and Pacific Islanders made up another 25 percent. The diverse students at Castro well represent the changing demographics of the larger city. Most of the students are U.S.-born children of immigrants. Their families represent an array of national origins, including Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, China, the Philippines, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Fiji. The majority of students are Latino (55 percent) and predominately of Mexican descent. Approximately 25 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander, and include a fast-growing Filipino population. Of the remainder, 10 percent are African American and 7 percent are white. Test score data from the California Department of Education show that Asian and Filipino students significantly outperform Latino, Pacific Islander, and African American students at Castro and in the school district. In 2014–2015, 76 percent of students were low-income and eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Although the socially diverse demographics and large second-generation student population of Castro are increasingly characteristic of schools located in urban centers across the country, the ethnic diversity of the Castro staff far exceeds that of the national teaching force.⁴ Among the twenty-seven staff members, including the administration, teachers, and parent outreach coordinator, the ethnoracial composition was roughly 56 percent white, 19 percent African American, 11 percent Latino, and 11 percent Asian-Pacific Islander. The diversity of the staff and students (including the limited pres-

3. I use pseudonyms for the school name, city name, and all names of respondents to protect anonymity.

4. The educator workforce nationally is roughly 80 percent white (U.S. Department of Education 2016).

ence of white students), and the progressive social politics of the local region made Castro a theoretically generative case to study how American identity is constructed within a school where we would strongly predict a multicultural national narrative to emerge. Although not generalizable in a statistical sense, the findings from this study also provide a sharper lens on how, within other school contexts with pronounced diversity, the process of assimilation can lead to a new shared image of national identity between the host society and immigrant community.

My methodology included participant observations three days a week at Castro, documenting how American identity was constructed during class lessons, in the curriculum, and through the social relations and structures of the school. This included observations in three eighth-grade U.S. history classrooms and three English-language arts (ELA) classrooms. The principal recommended the three teachers who taught both ELA and history for the study, and these teachers volunteered to participate. One ELA and history class served English learners (ELs) only, allowing me to assess whether American identity was constructed differently for EL students and mainstream students. I conducted additional participant observations in the cafeteria, main office, and on the schoolyard, as well as at various school events (performances, assemblies, staff meetings, and so on). I took photographs of school posters, murals, flyers, and notices as further evidence of the school's institutional culture.⁵

I conducted semistructured interviews with thirteen school staff members to ascertain the dominant model of American identity on campus, and the role of the school and local community in shaping this model. My respondents included nine seventh- and eighth-grade ELA

and history teachers, the principal, assistant principal, academic counselor, and family outreach coordinator. School personnel shared their thoughts on the meaning of American identity in the twenty-first century and discussed how the social context of the school and local community influenced their pedagogy, programming, and organizational decisions.

Finally, I conducted semistructured individual interviews with thirty-five eighth-grade students (ages twelve through fourteen) from the observed ELA and history classes to assess how peer interactions, school structures, and classroom lessons shaped how students conceptualized American identity.⁶ I selected consented student respondents that represented the different ethnic, racial, and generational status groups at the school. The final interview sample included seventeen Latino, nine black, four Asian-Pacific Islander, one white, and four other or mixed-race students representing a range of ethnicities, including Mexican, African American, Nigerian, Honduran, Saudi Arabian, Filipino, and Chinese. Nineteen of these students were males, sixteen were females. Most were second-generation immigrants, but the African American students had typically been in the country for at least three generations. Four students were immigrants. All interviews with students and staff were transcribed verbatim.

Using NVivo software, I coded, analyzed, and triangulated these data sources using a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz 1995), guided by how national identity has previously been operationalized in the literature (that is, values and beliefs, cultural practices and traditions, ethnoracial and linguistic boundaries, and common myths and heroes). I specifically drew on Theiss-Morse's social theory of national identity to determine which characteristics were used by the staff to describe core na-

5. A note on positionality, within classrooms, I alternated between being a quiet observer and engaging directly with students. Occasionally I served as a teaching assistant, made copies, and tutored. With the students, I positioned myself as a trusting adult keenly interested in their experience, but not a formal staff member. My identity as a Mexican American with an immigrant mother and my experience growing up in urban communities were often points of connection with the students and helped build rapport and openness in our conversations.

6. All students were given a consent form to return with the signature of their parent or guardian in order to participate in the interview. I informed students that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their academic evaluation in any way.

tionals, peripheral nationals, and foreigners (2009). I then analyzed how the school reproduced their model of a core national in their efforts to reduce the ethnic distance with their minority students (evidence of assimilation). Finally, I assessed whether the students reproduced the school's model of a true American and how this shaped their national identification.

STAFF DEFINITIONS OF AMERICAN IDENTITY

Interviews with the Castro teachers and administrators showed that the staff shared a similar vision of the American nation.⁷ They described America as a land of great opportunity and freedom, including being a place where teachers could present multiple perspectives on American history, rather than a strictly Eurocentric perspective. They also described America as a diverse nation with respect to race, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality, noting that this diversity of culture is what makes the country great. Some staff members directly tied the nation's diversity to the country's long history of immigration. In general, the teachers and administration felt strongly about helping students learn and celebrate national diversity by incorporating curricula that was responsive to their students' own cultural identities.

The views of Mr. Freeman, an African American ELA teacher in his mid-forties, capture that of other staff members in this regard. He believed that the school should include ELA and history curricula that reflects the diverse identities of the students within Castro and the nation.

I really am a firm believer that teachers in this day and age with our changing population, not only in California but all across the United States, really need to be culturally sensitive, respectful and use materials that reflect the classroom. If we are truly a melting pot and every culture has something to contribute to the American experience, then why not use authors that have contributed and to

show that to our students. So I've—we've read materials from Latino—Latino and Latina authors, we've read materials from Asian authors, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino authors. So I've tried to look at the population of my class and bring in materials that reflect, you know, their contribution to America.

Many of the staff expressed wanting to challenge the view that American history belongs to only white Americans by bringing in culturally responsive curricula. Ms. Fisher, for example, was a white teacher in her late fifties, and had taught English and history at the school for more than fifteen years. When asked what lessons from American history she hoped her students would remember in five years, she responded,

I've written quite a bit of curriculum about minorities represented in history and so when I go back and I look at some of the things we've done and some of the things we'll do in the future, it's always that—that they see people similar to them represented in history. So that would be the thing that I would like them to remember . . . that all of them represent history. It's not just the rich white guys, which is what the books do a lot of times.

In addition to acknowledging the nation's diversity, the staff described the unequal treatment of different social groups in the United States as a result of historic oppression and ongoing racism. Their examples of national injustice included recent events in Ferguson, Baltimore, and New York where unarmed black men were killed by police officers, rising anti-immigrant sentiment, and the struggle for marriage equality for gay couples. The staff therefore wanted to help students develop a critical understanding of the nation that acknowledged both diversity and inequality, and to prepare students to better embody America's values of acceptance, inclusion, and equality for all.

7. I use American to refer to the people of the United States or the sociopolitical community that defines the nation (Anderson 1983). I recognize that the Americas include two full continents, despite the colloquial usage of America or Americans to describe the people of the United States.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: LIMITED ASSIMILATION AT CASTRO

Although the Castro staff outwardly expressed a desire to create the image of a multicultural, multiracial America at the school, in practice, celebrating diversity nearly always meant celebrating blackness and the contributions of African Americans, rather than the broader ethnic representation of the school. Though African American students made up only 10 percent of the student population, the staff almost exclusively reduced the ethnic distance between the school and the African American students. Consequently, they neither constructed a national image that included Latino or Asian Americans, nor did they assimilate with their much larger Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander student population.

Bidirectional assimilation with African Americans was visible at both the school and district level. For example, a major effort within the school district was the African American Achievement Initiative (AAAI), which prioritized strengthening family engagement for African American parents at their local school sites, ensuring teachers were trained in implementing culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, and creating a school climate that was inclusive of African Americans. Schools were responsible for hosting two AAAI meetings a year, yet at Castro, numerous after-school events and assemblies throughout the school year were specifically dedicated to engaging African American parents and acknowledging African American students for their success in academic subjects, elective courses, sports, and school citizenship. These events were held either in the library in the center of campus, or in the multipurpose room, which served as the prime location for all-school events. According to the principal, AAAI events and similar school initiatives were equity-driven in an attempt to address the ongoing achievement gap between black students and Asian students at the school.

Castro staff also reduced the ethnic distance

with their African American students through school-wide events and contests. In celebration of Black History Month (February in the United States), the students in the leadership class put up a large poster-mural of African American heroes in the cafeteria that included activists, philosophers, and scientists. The school administration also organized a mandatory assembly to celebrate Black History Month that began with a photomontage of African American figures and the principal leading students in singing the black national anthem. Students from the drama class performed monologues from speeches by Malcolm X, Booker T. Washington, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King Jr. The STEP team performed several routines, and the school counselor presented awards for a schoolwide contest for the best essay and art project that focused on the contributions of African Americans.⁸ Notably, no other heritage months were celebrated at Castro during the school year.⁹

Beyond STEP, other aspects of African American culture and identity were reflected in Castro's art and music, as well as in the school visual environment. On the outside walls of campus buildings and the inside walls of classrooms were murals of African American figures, including a mural outside the music class of jazz legend Louis Armstrong. One classroom had two large artistic renderings of African American civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and Bayard Rustin hanging in the front of the room for the entire school year.

Assimilation with African Americans was also visible at the classroom level. In eighth-grade history and English classes throughout the year, teachers led lessons on the accomplishments of black Americans, including showing videos about the lives of baseball champion Jackie Robinson, the Freedom Riders of the civil rights movement, and transgender actress Laverne Cox. Teachers also assigned projects in which students had to research famous black writers, scientists, philosophers, and activists and present these figures to the

8. Stepping is a dance form historically associated with the African American community that involves using the body to make rhythms using a combination of clapping, footsteps, and spoken word.

9. The staff did not, for example, arrange school events to celebrate Hispanic-Latino Heritage Month (September 15 through October 15) or Asian Pacific American Heritage Month (May).

class. Students learned about leading abolitionist Harriet Tubman; hip-hop and rap artist Tupac Shakur; Barbara Jordan, the first African American woman in the U.S. House of Representatives; and Madam C. J. Walker, actress and entrepreneur of the early twentieth century. In two eighth-grade history classes, teachers showed episodes from the 1970s television miniseries *Roots*, describing the history of African Americans in the United States from the perspective of descendants of African slaves. Students also read literature by African American authors in their ELA classes, including *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes, a story about identity, belonging, and poetry told from the perspective of black and Latino youth in the inner city.

In short, the Castro staff used critical multicultural education—specifically, Afro-centric programming, practices, and curricula—that effectively reduced the ethnic distance between the schooling institution and the African American students. Moreover, the staff created a context in which African Americans were “true Americans,” despite ongoing inequality. Black Americans were projected as valuable members of both the national and school community and were incorporated into a diverse model of the American nation.

In sharp contrast to the African American students, the Castro staff made little effort to reduce the ethnic distance between the school and the Latino, Asian, or Pacific Islander students, despite the fact that these groups together made up the vast majority of the student population. The contributions of Latino and Asian Americans were entirely absent from school assemblies, events, and the school visual environment. While numerous classroom walls displayed imagery of African American figures, they did not display similar imagery of Latino or Asian Americans. Nor were there student groups or clubs like the STEP team that reflected the musical or dancing traditions of other ethnic groups. Interviews with the staff suggested that in the past, a Polynesian dance club had briefly existed at the school and per-

formed at the school talent show, but at the time of data collection, this group was essentially defunct and received little, if any, attention from the administration.

Although Latino families represented the majority of students at the school, these parents were not meaningfully incorporated into the activities of Castro. Many of the Latino parents had immigrated to the United States from Mexico and Central America and were Spanish-dominant, yet few staff members spoke Spanish at the school. One of these was Ms. Morales, the parent outreach coordinator who worked only part time at Castro. She organized a variety of educational workshops, English classes, and translation services for parents. However, informal conversations with Ms. Morales and Latino students suggested that she was one of the few staff members Latino parents interacted with at the school. Whereas activities with African American parents through AAAI took place in the center of campus, close to the administrative offices, activities for Latino parents were typically held in The Parent Center/Centro de Padres, which was located in a bungalow at the edge of the school campus. It was rare to see Latino parents in other areas of the school; the exception being the main office, where parents typically went to handle disciplinary issues with their child.¹⁰

At the classroom level, assimilation with Latino and Asian communities was also notably absent. In seven months of observations at the school, only twice did staff members provide curriculum that included a prominent Latino figure. On one occasion, the date was May 5, popularly known in the United States as Cinco de Mayo, a holiday originating in Mexico celebrating the defeat of the French by the Mexican army at the Battle of Puebla. This holiday has since become popularized in the United States as a day to celebrate a stereotypical, cartoon version of Mexican culture—including wearing *panchos* and *sombreros* and drinking Mexican beer—and has largely been detached from its historic significance. On this day, one of the ELA teachers, Ms. Fisher, began class this way:

10. Although parents' legal status may have affected their engagement at school, particularly among undocumented parents, it was largely unknown to the staff and was not collected for this study. That said, the staff typically included undocumented immigrants in their imagined vision of the national community.

MS. FISHER: We're going to talk about César Chávez today. Why today?

AVA: (enthusiastically raises her hand) Because it's Cinco de Mayo!

SONIA: What?

AVA: Cinco de Mayo.

MS. FISHER: That's right. So we're going to spend some time talking about him.

Ms. Fisher proceeded to have a discussion with the students about economic injustice, then showed a video on César Chávez, noted migrant labor activist.

Several things were noteworthy about this event. First, Ms. Fisher did not explain the significance of Cinco de Mayo, including its origin as a Mexican holiday that was then appropriated by Americans. By contrast, on Saint Patrick's Day in March, both the mainstream and EL teachers showed multiple videos in class explaining the historical origins and meaning of the holiday to Irish Americans. Second, despite the complete lack of connection between César Chávez and Cinco de Mayo, this was the only day during the school year that Ms. Fisher chose to focus on a Latino figure, specifically a Mexican American figure. César Chávez thus became a tokenized representation of Mexican culture more broadly, rather than a meaningful model of a Mexican American hero.

The only other occasion in which a Latino figure was mentioned in class was during a final assignment for U.S. history in which students had to choose a historical figure to research and portray for a living museum. The teacher, Ms. Walker, gave students a list of American figures to choose from (or they could research another figure), which included mostly white American and some African American figures. Also on this list was Pancho Villa, a controversial figure from the Mexican Revolution. When I asked Ms. Walker whether the

class had discussed Pancho Villa during the school year, possibly on a day when I was not on-site, she responded that they had not covered him in the curriculum, but that she wanted to include "someone from their culture." Indeed, Pancho Villa was a popular pick among the Latino boys in several of her classes. As one Mexican American boy explained on his poster, he selected Pancho Villa precisely because he was "the same culture." However, this event highlighted the trivialization of Mexican culture at Castro. Rather than integrate multiple models of Mexican American or other Latino American heroes into the curriculum, as the teachers had done with African Americans, Ms. Walker chose a Mexican national to represent Latino identity. Consequently, in this class, the only option available to represent a Latino was to be a foreigner.

Asian Americans and other ethnoracial groups were even more absent from classroom curricula than Latino Americans. On no occasion was an Asian American hero discussed in school curricula or programing. Moreover, several history teachers skipped the limited content provided in the U.S. history textbook that acknowledged the longtime presence of Chinese and Mexican communities in the country.¹¹ This included chapters addressing Chinese immigrants and the Chinese Exclusion Act, the settlements and culture of Mexican *Californios* in the early 1800s, and the Mexican-American War. Although teachers regularly face difficult choices about which content to cover in a school year, as well as institutional constraints around these choices (for example, test-based accountability), these notable exclusions effectively erased the early contributions and struggles of Asians and Latinos in the United States.

One teacher, Ms. Fisher, made some effort to educate her students about "other" (non-

11. The textbook used throughout the school district was *United States History: Independence to 1914*, published by Holt Rinehart & Winston (2006). Teachers described having a great deal of autonomy regarding which classroom materials they used as long as they met the state content standards for the eighth grade. This meant that the teachers' reliance on textbooks varied a great deal, but was more common for teaching history than ELA. In California at the time of data collection, teachers were accountable to standards released in 1998 before the arrival of new Common Core standards. The standards expected students to know about Mexican settlements of the early 1800s, the outcomes of the Mexican-American War on the lives of Mexican Americans today, and immigration to the northeast, but they make no mention of any Asian immigrants.

Christian) religions and holidays, including a lesson on Chinese New Year, yet the accompanying classroom discussions and assignments had the effect of distancing Chinese culture from American culture. Ms. Fisher began the lesson by telling the class, “Today you’re going to write an essay about whether you should celebrate Chinese New Year or American New Year to work on your argumentative writing.” She then passed out an article with two passages for the students to read. One passage was about celebrating the New Year in America and the other was about celebrating the New Year in China. After reading the passages aloud as a class, Ms. Fisher prepped the students on how to write their essays.

MS. FISHER: You need to choose one. [American New Year or Chinese New Year]

CARLOS: I thought you could choose both.

STEVEN: Yeah.

Without addressing these comments, Ms. Fisher went on to explain her model for writing the essay. Yet, as this brief exchange shows, the students disagreed with the premise of the assignment, which made them choose which holiday to celebrate as opposed to being able to celebrate both holidays, traditions, and cultures. In reality, many Chinese Americans in the United States celebrate Chinese New Year and the New Year on January first, and many non-Chinese Americans participate in Chinese New Year celebrations. The assignment, however, presented a forced choice: in essence, students could either be Chinese or American, but not both. Celebrating Chinese New Year thus turned into a marker that you were *not* American.

To summarize, although the staff made targeted efforts to include African Americans as true Americans within the national imaginary and to reduce the ethnic distance between these students and the school, the same could not be said for other ethnoracial groups at Castro, including Latino or Asian students. Using pedagogical strategies in line with CME and CRT, the staff directly challenged the hegemonic construction of true Americans as exclusively white and of European descent. However, when they attempted to incorporate Latino or

Asian identities within the school, they reproduced a token or essentialized representation of these identities or constructed them as foreign. It was thus not surprising that when Castro students were asked during their interviews to describe Americans, they in many ways reproduced the boundaries of American identity that were reflected in school practices and curricula.

ASSIMILATION AND STUDENT NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

This article began with the assumption that becoming American happens through the process of assimilation. I therefore expected that bidirectional assimilation would support the national identification of immigrant and minority groups by creating a modified image of a core national that was more ethnically similar to these groups and thus more easily recognizable. At Castro, interviews with eighth-grade students showed that African American students were indeed more likely than other ethnic groups to reproduce the multicultural national narrative put forth by the school staff that included African Americans specifically. They also more strongly identified as American themselves. However, in this same context, where Latinos and Asians were rarely depicted as American nationals or were absent from the national narrative altogether, Latino, Asian, and Pacific Islander students predominantly reproduced the ethnocultural image of Americans as white and English monolingual that is prevalent in mainstream media and policy (Linton 2009; Gándara and Hopkins 2010). Based on this definition of Americanness, Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander respondents typically separated their American English identity from their ethnic minority-language identity, or did not identify as American at all.

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICANS

African American students at Castro generally believed that America is a multiracial society that offers freedoms and opportunities not available in other countries. Consistent with the staff’s views, they also believed that diversity, tolerance, and multiculturalism were na-

tional values, despite the country's ongoing struggle with racism.

Lucas's description of Americans well exemplifies the common view among the African American students, specifically that Americans are a diverse people of many backgrounds and cultures, rather than a fixed, homogeneous culture. His own mixed ethnic identity as African American and Fijian reflects this diversity.

I would describe [Americans] as, you know, they're diverse in culture, like they're not just one. They're like, they can be Italian and German, like especially with the . . . Caucasian people, like they're not just one. They're not just German, specifically. They're like Italian, Irish and so forth and so on. And like with Hispanic people, they're not just Hispanic, they're El Salvadorian and Puerto Rican and Spaniard. So it's, you know, it's just a mix of cultures with everybody. They're not just one particular thing.

African American students also commonly suggested that to be American is to be accepting of all people, regardless of cultural background, and to reject prejudice. Concurrently, African American students often attributed their strong identification as Americans to the fact that they shared these national values. The views Levi expressed typify those of many of his African American peers, who like him, grew up in the highly diverse community of Bridgeview. I asked Levi to describe the values he thought were important to Americans and later whether he identified as American himself.

LEVI: Important values . . . Especially in America, you shouldn't be really judgmental of everyone, because everyone is so different and you can't really . . . You have to be accepting of people.

[. . .]

AUTHOR: How about for yourself personally, do you think of yourself as American?

LEVI: Yeah, I think of myself as American.

AUTHOR: How come?

LEVI: How come? I mean, I feel the culture. I'm really accepting of all people. Unless, you know, like you have some bad thoughts, like

you're prejudiced about people basically. Like you don't like that person because they believe in this, or they have that skin color but . . . yeah . . . I mean, you can't really live in this country if you're not really accepting of different kinds of people. That's what I believe.

Beyond diversity and acceptance, African American students described other aspects of American culture and disposition, including that Americans are smart, loud, dress a certain way, enjoy sports, like to party, like to be "outside the box," walk with swagger and conviction, know how to behave in certain social environments, and have knowledge of American history and heroes. Notably, they also discussed that Americans are free to be who they choose, say what they want, and (with the exception of breaking the law) do what they want, which they believed was not possible in many other countries. These freedoms were also important to their identification as American and their sense of national pride. Brandon, for example, discussed how his daily freedoms and opportunities made him feel American and set Americans apart from people in other countries.

AUTHOR: So how about for yourself personally, do you think of yourself as American?

BRANDON: Yeah.

AUTHOR: How come?

BRANDON: Because I was born in the U.S. and lived in the U.S. all my life and I have the freedom to do what I want and when I wanna do it.

AUTHOR: Are you proud of, or, how proud of you are you being American?

BRANDON: Very, because some people are born not American, and probably going through hell, so for me to be American and living a good life, it makes me happy because some people don't even—can't even do most of the things I do every day. They have to suffer so . . .

AUTHOR: Sure, what are some things that you feel like you do every day that other people don't get?

BRANDON: Fast food, basketball practice, hanging out with friends, homework, talking on

the phone. Most people can't do that every day.

An important distinction between African American students and other students at Castro was that African American students rarely used ethnocultural descriptors to define Americans, including race or language. Only one student mentioned race as a defining feature of Americans, but as a measure of inclusion rather than exclusion. This student, Olivia, said that her racial identity as African American is what made her feel American. She also used the example of African Americans overcoming slavery to exemplify that Americans (broadly) are strong and smart. African American students also rarely used English to describe fellow nationals. Nearly all of them saw value in learning multiple languages and believed this should be required of all Americans. In their view, one's identity as a true American was based less on specific ascriptive attributes, and more on pluralism, acceptance across social differences, and freedoms. Based on these definitions, African American students strongly identified as American.¹²

LATINO AND ASIAN-PACIFIC ISLANDER STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICANS

In contrast to the African American students, Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander students most often described Americans in ethnocultural terms, specifically as white and English monolingual. They also commonly conflated their national, racial, and linguistic identities, unlike their African American peers.

Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander students generally believed that true Americans—whom they sometimes referred to as American Americans or full Americans—speak English, do not speak another language, and do not have an accent. The majority of these students also described Americans as white, explicitly noting their white or light skin, blond hair, and blue

eyes. They used these ascriptive features to construct a social boundary that determined who was also partially American and who was foreign.

Emilio's view captures this position well. Like most of the Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander students at the school, Emilio is bilingual and a U.S.-born child of immigrant parents. He grew up in Bridgeview but his parents are from Mexico. Here Emilio uses a combination of race, language, and accent to distinguish full Americans from others.

AUTHOR: Do you think you can tell when someone is not American?

EMILIO: I think everyone says this—that it's because of your color and your accent.

AUTHOR: What do you mean by color?

EMILIO: Usually everyone is white. My friends that are American, fully American, they're all white. They're usually not tanned. They have light hair, like light brown or blonde. Their accent is full-on English. They don't have an accent.

This definition of American in terms of English and whiteness strongly affected the national identification of Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander students and their relationship to school. Although most Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander students identified as American to some degree, their connection to American identity predominately came from their identity as English speakers. This also meant that Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander students felt American when they were in settings where they mostly spoke English, including at school. Conversely, they felt less American or not American when they spoke Spanish, Tagalog, or Mandarin, or when they were in an environment where minority languages were dominant, usually at home or with their family. Roughly half of the Latino respondents described being split as both Mexican and American for this very reason, rather than identify-

¹² The one white student interviewed for this project, Kaylee, had a similar view of Americans as the African American students. Kaylee described Americans in terms of their freedoms and rights, and specifically referenced the struggle of African Americans for freedom as an exemplar for why Americans nationally have the freedoms they do. She said she learned about these freedoms from videos in history class, including a video on the Freedom Riders of the civil rights movement.

ing as a hybrid Mexican American identity. Their American side was their English-speaking, school-going side, and their Mexican side was their Spanish-speaking family side.

Laura's interview best demonstrates the feelings of many Latino students. Laura is a second-generation Mexican American and a bilingual English-Spanish speaker. Here she explains her split identity as half American and half Mexican:

LAURA: I feel that I am half and half because a large proportion of my life revolves around being American because I speak a lot of English, and because the community around me is mostly people who live in here and who speak this language. But then, there's always the other half of my family . . . they speak Spanish. We usually have that. . . how would you explain it? Not so much belief, but it's the culture we share together. So half—like my life usually revolves around the American side, but then I have some parts of my life where it's the Mexican and I talk and I'm used to being in like a Spanish-speaking community and I have the stereotypical Spanish food and those kinds of things.

AUTHOR: Got it. So, which aspects of your life do you feel like the American side revolves around?

LAURA: School, education. That's the large part, a large proportion of my life.

AUTHOR: Yeah.

LAURA: That's like my number one thing. . . . Because it's English, because . . . we're usually taught that.

Laura's association between her English identity and her American identity was common among the Latino and Asian respondents. Indeed, studies of American identity among immigrant and second-generation minority groups have found a similar association between American identity and English (Lippi-Green 2012), and between this association and schooling (Olsen 1997; Olsen 2000). Notably, students like Laura have learned to compartmentalize their American English identity and their ethnic Spanish identity. Much like the activity when students had to choose between

celebrating American New Year and Chinese New Year, the interviews with Latino students suggest that many have internalized a forced separation between their ethnic and national selves. Yet instead of choosing one or the other, most Latino students felt an attachment to both. At the same time, they saw this hyphenated or split identity as an indication that they were not fully American.

For Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander students who defined American identity in terms of both English and whiteness, these students either struggled to identify as American or did not identify as American at all, including those who were U.S. born. In their view, whiteness functioned as yet another boundary that prevented them from seeing themselves as full Americans. Take Sam, for example, a second-generation Chinese American who struggled with this issue. When first asked to describe Americans, Sam characterized them as white and blond. He then elaborated that you could tell Asians and Hispanics were not American because they "look different than white people." I later asked Sam whether he identified as American. He responded this way:

SAM: Yeah, I think.

AUTHOR: Okay, how come?

SAM: Because I was born here and. . . . I don't know. I don't know. I'm not sure.

AUTHOR: You're not—okay, so what makes you not sure?

SAM: Because my parents are a different race, yeah.

AUTHOR: Okay. You're saying they are a different race. What are you referring to?

SAM: Errrr, I don't know.

AUTHOR: That they're—that they're Chinese or that they're Asian?

SAM: They're Asian.

Sam questioned his identity as American because of his family's racial background. In his view, to be American is to be white, and as he and his parents are Asian, he cannot be a true American, despite the fact that he was born in the United States. This same feeling was shared by U.S.-born Latinos, as well as Filipino immigrants who similarly defined Americans in terms of whiteness. Whereas English fluency

provided an avenue for these students to at least partially identify as American, race served as an impenetrable boundary that prevented these students from identifying as core nationals.

Even Julie, a mixed-race Pacific Islander and white student whose family had been in the United States for over three generations, similarly described “straight Americans” (true Americans) as white and rejected identifying as American herself: “I don’t personally think I’m an American because like, I’m like mixed with so many different cultures. . . . I don’t think I’m just straight American, like straight white people. I’m mostly Pacific Islander, and so that’s why I like, tend to not think that I’m American.”

Julie preferred to identify as Islander or Hawaiian and distanced herself from Americans she felt were both homophobic and prejudiced against nonwhite groups. Her perspective is particularly illuminating because it shows that an ethnocultural description of Americans extended well into the fourth generation of Asian–Pacific Islander students, suggesting that this description does not necessarily disappear with more generations in the United States.

Latino and Asian–Pacific Islander students thus viewed the American nation in fundamentally different ways from African American students, largely because of their different perceptions of how race and language were social boundaries to national inclusion. These views may be partially explained by the dramatic difference in the way Latinos, Asians, and African Americans were included within the national imaginary of the school. African Americans were consistently constructed as core members of the national mainstream and the achievements of African American students were celebrated. This provided an image of Americans that was more ethnically similar to the African American students, enabling them to more easily recognize themselves as members of the nation (Miller 1995). However, Latinos and Asians were almost entirely left out of the national im-

age constructed by the staff, mirroring the relative absence of these communities from the historical memory of the nation (Donato 1997). Thus, Latino and Asian students were less able to recognize their fuller cultural selves in the national community, and often reproduced a definition of Americanness based primarily on English-speaking ability.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article illustrates the role of bidirectional assimilation in shaping both shared notions of national identity and national identification. I theorized that bidirectional assimilation can produce a modified definition of a core national that is more ethnically similar to immigrant and minority groups, facilitating the identification of these groups as American. I showed empirically how this relationship plays out within one of the most important institutions in the Americanization process: schools. Although many factors contribute to how children imagine the nation, the role of schools in shaping national perceptions should not be underestimated.¹³ In schools, students learn the nation’s values (freedom, democracy, equality), the common language, and the history of the country and its people. Thus, although findings from this study are not generalizable statistically, they show how new shared notions of Americanness can emerge through the process of assimilation within highly diverse schools.

In the case of Castro Middle School, staff efforts to reduce the ethnic distance between the school and African American students were guided by their image of the nation as multicultural and racially diverse, which they wished to reproduce among students. However, observational data showed that in practice, bidirectional assimilation at Castro was limited by a racial paradigm that constructed race and diversity in America as almost exclusively limited to the experiences of blacks and whites (Perea 1997). Thus, while the staff reduced the ethnic distance with their small African American student population through school programming, events, and curricula that highlighted the ex-

13. Other factors may include parent background, local politics, and dominant portrayals of Americans in the media and policy. However, little empirical research has actually explored how these other factors shape the national perceptions of children.

periences and culture of African Americans, they did not assimilate with their much larger Latino and Asian student populations. Latino and Asian identities were notably absent from the national community within the school. On the few occasions when they were included in curriculum, they appeared in an essentialized or foreign form, as in the examples of César Chávez and Pancho Villa.

This disparity in representation may be partly due to the limited availability of alternative racial frames within the American national imaginary and mainstream institutions. The history of slavery, the national trauma of the Civil War, and the iconography of the civil rights movement have profoundly shaped the racial discourse and historical memory of the country. The lack of shared national memories and mainstream curriculum materials that acknowledge the contributions of nonblack minority groups means educators have limited resources to construct a national image that challenges a black-white racial binary paradigm, even in a school like Castro, where staff members take a race-conscious approach to school inclusion.

Despite these disparities in practice, assimilation between the school and African American students at Castro was shown to support their national identification. The staff constructed African Americans as true Americans, despite ongoing racism in the country. This image enabled African American students to more easily recognize themselves as core nationals and to identify as such. These findings contradict those of Theiss-Morse's national study of American identity, which showed that strong American identifiers were more likely to define prototypical Americans in ethnocultural terms and black respondents were more likely to consider themselves atypical Americans relative to other racial groups (2009). This study suggests that theories of national identity must take into account the potential of assimilation to shift the definition of a prototypical American away from an ethnocultural model and toward a model that reflects the identities of historically marginalized groups. In local contexts where this is the case, ethnic minorities—including African Americans—may more likely view themselves as typical Americans.

In contrast to the African American students at Castro, Latino and Asian-Pacific Islander students more often reproduced an ethnocultural model of Americanness, defined primarily as English monolingual and white. This definition led many of the Latino and Asian students to either split their national and ethnic identity into two non-overlapping parts (such as English American and Spanish Mexican), or to reject an American identification outright. These findings are consistent with studies of ethnic and national identity among Latino and Asian students in college (Devos, Gavin, and Quintana 2010; Cheryan and Monin 2005), second-generation Latino and Asian Americans (Bloemraad 2013; Lash 2017), and high school immigrants of various backgrounds (Olsen 1997) that found similar associations between American identity, English, and whiteness. We might predict that these associations would disappear with more time in the United States and more exposure to American multiculturalism. Yet the interview with Julie (fourth-generation Pacific Islander white student) suggests that, rather than a marker of students' newcomer status, ethnocultural descriptions of Americans are more likely a reflection of the history of colonialism and the continuing racialization of Latino and Asian groups as Other, inferior, or foreign (Tuan 1998; Oboler 1997; Kim 1999). Still, the persistence of the ethnocultural narrative among the Latino and Asian students at Castro is noteworthy given the school's concerted efforts to construct a national image that was inclusive of African Americans.

Certainly the ethnocultural model of the nation has deep roots in U.S. history and continues to be reproduced at the macro-level of mainstream media, language policy, and anti-immigrant policies (Linton 2009; Gándara and Hopkins 2010; Chavez 2008), as well as at the meso-level of school practice (Olsen 1997; Lippi-Green 2012; Pérez Huber 2011; Crawford 2000). It is therefore possible that the school's message of national diversity was not enough to counter the hegemonic ethnocultural narrative from being reproduced among Latino and Asian students, particularly given that these students were not presented with a model of Americanness that included their ethnic or racial identities at the school. Scholarship from

sociolinguistics further suggests that the strong association between standard English and whiteness (Bucholtz 2001) effectively positions African Americans as distorters of English or not “true English-speakers” (Lippi-Green 2012). This may explain why Latino and Asian students who described true Americans primarily in terms of English did not include African Americans in their description, especially given the staff’s regular enforcement of standard English as the linguistic norm of the school. More research is needed to explore whether Latino or Asian students have a more pluralist view of the nation and stronger national identification if they attend a school with a more critical language ideology or more expansive view of national diversity.

Although this study confirms the ongoing significance of race in the assimilation process, it provides important nuance to the existing literature on this point. Sociologists have posited that race may be a barrier to the incorporation of immigrants within the host society, but largely characterized the host society (or at least the upwardly mobile sector) as white, Anglo, and middle class (Gordon 1964; Portes and Zhou 1993). My findings reveal that even in a local context where the American mainstream included blackness, race still presented a barrier to the incorporation of Latino and Asian students. This study also complicates Portes and Zhou’s argument that interaction with native-born youth of the inner city and ties to African American culture will necessarily lead to downward assimilation and a rejection of mainstream America (1993). The findings from Castro suggest that were mainstream institutions to construct an image of the nation that includes African American identity, this would support a positive American identification among these youths.

Finally, this research shows how the process of assimilation and the outcome of national identification are both influenced by local definitions of the mainstream. The findings demonstrate that district policies, school leadership, the ethnic composition of students and staff, and the politics of the local community all shape how the boundaries of the nation are reproduced among youth, as well as how the assimilation process unfolds at the institu-

tional and group level. Future research should continue to explore assimilation in context, providing important nuance to existing quantitative scholarship.

This study carries a number of implications for schools and classrooms as they navigate a changing national terrain. How we define ourselves as a nation and whom we see ourselves becoming as a result of the influence of immigration has significant implications for national educational standards, language policy decisions, textbook and curriculum design, and teacher education and professional development. Findings from this study may therefore guide policymakers, curriculum designers, and practitioners toward creating a national narrative that is inclusive of our increasingly diverse population. At the micro level, this study also illuminates the conscious and unconscious ways that school staff members transmit messages to students about who does and does not belong in the nation. As student’s sense of belonging is significantly linked to academic achievement and motivation (Osterman 2000), the findings suggest that educators should ensure their model of national inclusion aligns with school practices at the organizational, programmatic, and curricular level, as well as in daily interactions with students. Educators must also reflect on how their model of diversity may exclude students from full membership in the national community based on race, language, or culture.

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