Black Mexicans, Conjunctural Ethnicity, and Operating Identities: Long-Term Ethnographic Analysis
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Black Mexicans, Conjunctural Ethnicity, and Operating Identities: Long-Term Ethnographic Analysis

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Abstract
This article draws on more than 15 years of research to analyze “Black Mexicans,” phenotypically “Mexican-looking” youth who identified as Black during adolescence, used this identity to become upwardly mobile, and then abandoned it in early adulthood. Black Mexicans are potentially iconic cases among emerging varieties of U.S. ethnic and racial life, given Mexicans’ status as a key, usually negative, case in assimilation theory. Most such theory posits that assimilation into Black, inner-city culture leads to downward mobility. To explain how and why this did not happen for Black Mexicans, I propose a sensitizing framework using the concepts of conjunctural ethnicity, emphasizing analysis of racial and ethnic identity in local, historical, and life course contexts; and operating identity, which analyzes identities in interactions and can accommodate slippage in informants’ understanding or use of ethnic and racial categories. Some Mexicans used a Black culture of mobility to become upwardly mobile in the late-1990s and early-2000s in New York, adopting a socially advantaged operating identity that helped them in ways they felt Mexicanness could not in that historical conjuncture, especially given intra-ethnic competition between teen migrants and second-generation youth. This article uses case-based ethnographic analysis and net-effects analysis to explain why and how Blackness aided upward mobility among Black and non-Black Mexicans, but was left behind in early adulthood.

Keywords
conjunctural ethnicity, operating identities, ethnography, race and ethnicity, Mexican, children of immigrants, teen migrants, undocumented

“I am Black,” Valerio calmly repeats to his parents. Disbelievingly, they answer, “No you’re not. Go look in the mirror!” Frustrated, they turn to me, “Tell him . . . He’s Mexican, not Black.” I witnessed similar scenes among other “Black Mexicans” I came to know during more than 15 years of research with children of Mexican immigrants in New York. “Black Mexicans” describes phenotypically “Mexican-looking” (brown skin, high cheekbones, straight black hair) youth who publicly self-identify as Black in adolescence, although not as young adults. This article seeks to understand how and why these adolescents began to, and then stopped, seeing themselves

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this way, how Black identification facilitated upward mobility, and what this means for sociological understandings of assimilation, race/ethnicity, and mobility.

Claiming and relinquishing Black identity by upwardly mobile children of Mexican immigrants, who are unlikely to be identified as Black by others, is sociologically important for two reasons. First, it contradicts most assimilation theory and public opinion that expect integration into Black, inner-city culture to cause downward mobility. Understanding how such theory does not accommodate upwardly mobile Black Mexicans deepens our theoretical knowledge. Second, in analyzing how, why, and in what contexts Black Mexicans identify as such, and how non-Black Mexicans also use Blackness in upward mobility, I develop two new concepts for studying race and ethnicity among children of immigrants, especially in new destinations with distinct local racial and ethnic hierarchies. Conjunctural ethnicity is a loosely jointed framework and sensitizing concept (Blumer 1954) that considers three key conjunctures or contexts: (1) local contexts (e.g., local racial and ethnic hierarchies, neighborhoods, and schools); (2) historical contexts (e.g., evolving meanings of intra/intergroup membership and immigrant settlement processes); and (3) life course contexts or phases. Operating identities are mental constructs enacted and communicated via symbolic interaction that prime specific categories (Collins 1991), including ethnic, racial, and gender images. Historical and local contexts affect which operating identities gain traction and how much flexibility people have in choosing identities (Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov 2004; Giddens 1984). Neither concept relies mainly on group-level meanings to ethnicity (e.g., Mexican “reactive ethnicity”), but instead also analyzes intra-group variation. Focusing on meanings emerging in localities, intra/intergroup relations, and interactions, I analyze emerging ethnicity for children of immigrants in New York, a new destination for Mexican immigrants.

The article also illustrates longitudinal ethnography’s utility in developing theory, using three types of data. Primarily, I use ethnographic case data on three Black Mexicans whose Blackness facilitated upward mobility: Carla, the cosmopolitan striver, whose Blackness helps her reach Elite University and a professional career; Valerio, the self-described thug, whose Blackness helps him avoid self-perceived complications of being Mexican and succeed in school and work; and Linda, whose “good girl” Blackness led to college graduation and work.1 Second, I present data from the whole 98-person dataset for the New York Children of Mexican Immigrants Project (NYCOMP), showing that Black friends, practices, and institutions also promoted upward mobility for Mexican-origin youth who did not identify as Black. Finally, I analyze larger social conditions of Mexican incorporation in New York in the late-1990s to early-2000s, using data describing the population (e.g., Census data) or larger social processes occurring within it (e.g., teen migrants and second-generation competition).

**BLACK MEXICANS AS UNANTICIPATED CASES FOR ASSIMILATION THEORY**

Black Mexicans provide insight into contemporary thinking about how racial and ethnic identity and assimilation relate to mobility. Most assimilation theories view Mexicans as a critical, negative case (Chavez 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waters and Jimenez 2005), due to the group’s large size, low levels of human capital (Borjas 1999; Perlmann 2005; Perlmann and Waldinger 1997), and racialized incorporation (Ogbu 1987; Telles and Ortiz 2008), which yield stagnated long-term incorporation.2 Many theories link assimilation into U.S. Black culture with downward mobility. Waters (1994, 1999), for example, finds second-generation West Indian youths’ life chances improve with ethnic/immigrant West Indian identification, but decline with American Black identification (Gans 1992).

Segmented assimilation, a main theory of immigrant integration for two decades, explicitly theorizes how identity and mobility relate for Mexicans and inner-city minority culture
(Lopez and Stanton-Salazar 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Zhou 1999). Moving beyond prior theory that posits upward mobility via White mainstream assimilation (Gordon 1964; Warner and Srole 1945), segmented assimilation theory argues that variations in human capital, context of reception, family structure, and community coherence determine whether immigrant parents attain middle-class status. These factors set later generations on what we can call “identity-mobility paths”: upward mobility via White mainstream acculturation; segmented upward assimilation wherein ethnicity aids mobility, insulating against discrimination; or acculturation into a Black, or rainbow, underclass with oppositional culture. As the largest group facing the longest continued discrimination, children of Mexican immigrants acquire oppositional, “reactive ethnicity” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:283–85; see also Fordham 1996; Ogbu 1987; Willis 1981) that promotes downward mobility. Mexicans incorporating into either Mexican American or native Black culture should thus face dismal futures. Upwardly mobile native minorities are theoretical exceptions.3 Segmented assimilation theory makes key contributions, describing how structural factors, social capital, and non-White ethnicity can foster upward mobility (see, e.g., Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008), but it creates a blind spot in positing an apparently unitary rainbow underclass culture. Here, it theorizes culture as working too much at the whole-group level, independent of context, and as persisting too unchanged through adolescence into early adulthood, hindering the theory’s ability to accommodate some varieties of racial and ethnic experience.

That Blackness promoted upward mobility for these youth in ways they did not believe Mexicanness could in the late-1990s and early-2000s, although unanticipated by much assimilation theory, can be understood using other research linking race and mobility. Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) argue that a “Black/minority culture of mobility” promotes achievement by recognizing racial obstacles and offering tools (e.g., critical achievement ideology, persistence, and cultural bridging [Carter 2008; Carter 2005]) to overcome them and related identity threats.4 This culture emerges over time, responding to discrimination and disseminating information, such as which public schools are best.5 Such a culture was seen in the pre-civil-rights era in African American high achievement in historically Black colleges and Department of Defense, religious, and independent schools, which offered counter-hegemonic narratives and institutional practices to support Black children’s identities as achievers while acknowledging racism (Perry, Steel, and Hilliard 2003).

A minority culture of mobility has grown in the post-civil-rights era, aided by affirmative action and institutional policy to end discrimination and promote minority mobility, especially helping children of immigrants (Alba 2009; Massey 2008). A positive relationship between Black racial identity and schooling is also promoted through choosing supportive peer groups, relating well to less successful peers (Akom 2003; Conchas and Noguera 2004; Gibson, Gandara, and Koyama 2004; Horvat and Lewis 2003), and fostering a positive ethnic image and community support (Waters 1994, 1999). School success appears “White” only where race closely tracks educational inequality (Horvat and O’Connor 2006; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). It was this Black culture of mobility that Black Mexicans and other Mexican youth contrasted with emerging meanings of Mexicanness and used for upward mobility in the late-1990s and early-2000s.

This article engages prior theory, explicitly considering how ethnic identity evolves through the life course (Erikson 1968; Waldinger and Feliciano 2004) and challenging theories that seemingly presume adolescent stances endure, Peter Pan-like (Myers 2006; Smith 2008). Segmented assimilation posits a harshly negative institutional context for inner-city minorities, whereas this article and other research (e.g., Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008) report positive institutional effects via “second chance mechanisms” (Kasinitz et al. 2008:20; Smith 2008:272) and
affirmative action programs. Similarly, using the key insight of Alba and Nee’s (2003) “remade assimilation theory,” that institutional contexts and cognitive category changes affect assimilation, I explain how and why such categories are adopted and challenged via specific processes. Moreover, most research theorizes group-level ethnicity and uses mainly cross-sectional data, whereas I use case-specific data and analyze how ethnic and racial identity can vary by life course and group-settlement stage, and by specific context, even during a single day. Many assimilation theories pay gender scant attention, but here, I depict operating identities refracted through gender within different contexts. I also analyze a non-White dominant group engaged in establishing a status hierarchy (Jimenez and Horowitz 2011; Lee and Zhou 2014). Finally, I offer original data on how legal status affects Mexican ethnicity in the interaction between first-generation teen migrants and second-generation Mexican Americans.

CONTEXTUAL ETHNICITY, OPERATING IDENTITIES, AND NEW VARIETIES OF RACIAL/ETHNIC EXPERIENCE

Conjunctural Ethnicity

Black Mexicans emerged from Mexicans’ conjunctural ethnicity in New York during the late-1990s and early-2000s. Conjunctural ethnicity recognizes that ethnicity emerges in historical and social conjunctures and contexts (Nagel 2003; Patterson 1977; Wimmer 2008), and it focuses on the local, historical, and life course contexts of children of immigrants, seeking to capture dynamic and sometimes unanticipated processes that affect racial and ethnic experiences.

The first conjuncture, or context, is the life course phase: ethnicity moves from urgent center-stage in adolescence—youth try on identities during Erikson’s (1968) “moratorium” period—to a more equal place among other identities in early adulthood (Phinney 1985; Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005; Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008). Hence, although teens feel compelled to reject meanings of Mexicanness different from their own, young adults usually accept other meanings more readily (Quintana, Castaneda-English, and Ybarra 1999). Second, ethnicity can recede as young adults enter contexts (e.g., work) where teen ethnic and racial expressions are less appropriate, or ethnicity seems less tied to future prospects or co-worker relations (Dannefer 2013). Long-term ethnographies can document changes in ethnic and racial identity over time (Weisner 1996).

The second context—local racial and ethnic hierarchies, population compositions, and institutions (e.g., schools, police, and housing)—and third context—a group’s place in settling and establishing itself as a recognized group (Nagel 2003; Lareau 2003; Takenaka 2003; Wimmer 2008)—are covered jointly because they interact. How local contexts and the conjuncture of Mexican immigration to New York produced Black Mexicans and a positive association with Blackness can be made clearer via contrast with prior southwestern research. Jimenez (2010; see also Ochoa 2004) shows how new Mexican immigrants replenish and challenge the authenticity of established, later-generation Mexican American ethnicity, creating intra-ethnic fault lines. Simultaneously, Mexican Americans are “foreignized” by Whites, especially darker-skinned individuals and men; women and lighter-skinned Mexican Americans have more “flexible ethnicity” (Vasquez 2010).

Mexicans in New York experienced similar intra-ethnic conflicts in different contexts, with a different population composition and settlement stage. In New York, the sudden, simultaneous emergence of teen and first-generation migrants, alongside a New York–born second generation, as publicly identifiable groups with distinct trajectories, caused conflict over who and what would embody Mexicanness. New York’s Mexican population increased from about 40,000 in 1980 to about 300,000 in 2000. Family reunification and
related, undocumented immigration after the 1986 amnesty caused a decade-long spike in the teen migrant population. These teens were concentrated in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, making them the main public face of Mexicans in public schools. At the same time, the first sizeable second-generation cohort started coming of age, often feeling they were “the only Mexican” in their grade schools, but encountering more Mexicans in high school. In 2000, there were more foreign-born (12,108) than native-born (2,694) Mexican Americans age 16 to 19 years in New York. U.S.-born youth did better academically than Mexico-born youth and lived in higher-income households (see Table 1). Table 1 also shows there are now roughly even ratios of U.S.-born and migrant youth. The former have fared increasingly well between 2000 and 2010, with increasing high school and college attendance rates (Smith forthcoming).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education or Population Category</th>
<th>2000 U.S. Census</th>
<th>2005 to 2009 ACSa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19- to 23-year-old U.S.-born Mexicans in college</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19- to 23-year-old Mexican-born Mexicans in college</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16- to 19-year-old U.S.-born Mexican population in NY</td>
<td>2,694</td>
<td>8,443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16- to 19-year-old Mexican-born population in NY</td>
<td>12,108</td>
<td>7,309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- to 18-year-old U.S.-born Mexican population in NY</td>
<td>23,024</td>
<td>43,308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- to 18-year-old Mexican-born Mexican population in NY</td>
<td>16,337</td>
<td>10,784</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16- to 19-year-old U.S.-born Mexicans enrolled in or graduated from high school</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16- to 19-year-old Mexico-born Mexicans enrolled in or graduated from high school</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican-born median household income in 2000, Mexicans in NYb</td>
<td>$42,125</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.-born median household income in 2000, Mexicans in NYb</td>
<td>$56,250</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aTabulation from Public Use Micro-Data Samples of the 2000 Census Long Form and 2005 to 2009 American Community Survey by Susan Weber under the direction of Professor Andrew A. Beveridge, Queens College, CUNY. Data are based on 5 percent samples and therefore are subject to sampling error.

*bBergad (2011).

Americans rejected dominant negative images (Collins 1991) of new Mexican immigrants as powerless green-grocery workers, “ESLs,” or “illegals” who would leave school. Most recent Mexican immigrants in New York were and are still undocumented, directly reflecting public policies regulating access to legal status. Indeed, the rate of undocumented status falls sharply for individuals in New York only after more than 20 years residence—around the time of the 1986 “amnesty”—compared to those with up to 20 years in New York, reflecting immigration policies making it harder to legalize.8

This simultaneous public emergence created conflicts, leading many second-generation youth to seek more positive images and operating identities. Some became Black Mexicans because they saw school success as part of being Black but not part of being Mexican (Carter 2008). Becoming Black also signaled they were not “illegal.” That U.S. immigration policy has largely blocked legalization for 25 years threatens to make this Mexicanness—illegality link a caste-like status.

New York’s larger racial/ethnic context also fosters this conjunctural ethnicity. Most New York youth do not inhabit the White-dominated social worlds presumed in most
research. Rather, New York’s global diversity means most groups not only feel like minorities, but numerically are minorities in their neighborhoods. In Sunset Park, a “little Mexico,” Mexicans were 13 percent of the population in a “Puerto Rican” neighborhood (22 percent Puerto Rican [Census 2000]). The compositions of my informants’ neighborhoods varied, but their schools were mainly Black and Latino, because some groups (e.g., Orthodox Jews and wealthy Whites) largely avoid public schools. Students can thus move between starkly different racial and ethnic contexts within their day. Differences between Black and Latino lives can seem less consequential than similarities, fostering pan-minority identities. Finally, because high schools draw from beyond their zones, they do not integrate neighborhoods as they once did, but are still primary sites for forming adolescent friendships. In this context, Mexican Americans’ phenotype did not matter mainly vis-a-vis Whites, as in most research. Rather, how “Mexican” they looked or acted—a function of phenotype, dress, interactional demeanor and friendships—determined if they got stepped up to, mostly by other Mexicans (Smith 2006, 2013).

New York City’s school-choice system affected how Mexican ethnicity and educational mobility relate (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Sattin-Bajaj forthcoming; Smith 2002, 2006). At this time, New York students attended zoned schools, which had to take anyone in their zone, and hence often concentrated weak students who did not apply or get in elsewhere; more competitive schools that drew beyond zones; or elite schools where entrance was governed by competitive exam. Many informants were funneled into their zoned high school, the first school they attended with many other Mexicans. Mexican gangs often confronted each other in and around these schools (Smith 2002, 2004, 2006), enacting a Mexican ethnicity tied tightly to gangs and poor school performance. Step-ups often involved undocumented, teen migrants confronting second-generation Mexican Americans. The resulting “hyper-accessibility effect” (Brubaker et al. 2004:44) made it seem most Mexican youth, especially teen migrants, were in gangs, crowding out more pro-school enactments of Mexicanness (Smith 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008; Suttles 1968).

Some Mexican parents saw Blacks as the main threat, sending their children to high schools with their Mexican cousins—the “safety in numbers” strategy. Others saw Mexicans as more dangerous and used the “avoid Mexicans” strategy, choosing better, distant schools to escape Mexican middle school friends. Avoiding cousins was especially important, because teen migrants who cut school often drew on home-based relationships (relationships unlikely to emerge in school because cousins were in different programs—ESL versus regular or special programs) and invited their New York–born cousins to cut with them and attend hooky parties.

Operating Identity

Being a Black Mexican was a socially advanced operating identity for Carla, Valerio, and Linda. I previously used the term “socially neutral operating identity” to describe upwardly mobile Mexican youth who sought to avoid drawing excess attention to avoid challenges while succeeding academically (Smith 2008:279). Youth who adopt a socially advanced operating identity take on social habits and identities that enable them to enter higher status and higher achievement peer groups. Carter (2005:52; see also Dance 2002) notes Black youth must “‘do’ or ‘act’ Blackness appropriately” to be seen as legitimately Black. The cognitively oriented concept operating identity does not treat ethnicity as an ontological reality—something existing in itself—but as an epistemological one, something perceived by people to exist, and then enacted, or not (Brubaker et al. 2004; Giddens 1984; Swidler 1986). Operating identities are mental constructs enacted and communicated via symbolic interaction (Goffman 1959, 1963), priming specific categories and images. Black Mexicans primed in others and internalized in themselves a cognitively dissident ethnic identity. They code-switched in very local contexts and
cultures (e.g., schools and neighborhoods), jumping symbolic boundaries between groups (Lamont and Molnar 2002). These teens adopted Black practices in public but could leave them aside at home.

That Blackness could promote upward mobility indicates these youth understood the concept more broadly than its normal sociological usage. “Black” was both a racial descriptor and a broader social category, associated in this period with hip hop, gangster rap, and certain clothes (e.g., Timberland boots). Being Black did not mean others believed one literally had African heritage, but implied belonging within a school’s hegemonic Black youth culture, which accommodated upward mobility. These youth worked toward Blackness as prior immigrants worked toward Whiteness (Kasinitz 2008; Roediger 2005). “Mexicanness” was similarly a racial descriptor and social category related to the larger presentation of self, including clothes (e.g., Paco jeans), language, haircuts (no shape up14), and the vulnerability of undocumented status. Black Mexicans “worked away” from the stigmatized meaning associated with Mexicanness.15

Black Mexican operating identities were also gendered enactments of race and dominant images (Collins 1991; Connell 1995; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Vasquez 2010; West and Zimmerman 1985). Such images are manifestations of people’s mental constructs, their ethnic and gender “map of and for the world” in Geerts’s (1973) phrase.16 All Black Mexican boys in the NYCOMP data adopted some version of Black thug identity, seeking the respect they felt Mexicans did not get; girls all adopted smart or good Black girl identities. As I will discuss, these images did things for them they felt being Mexican could not.

**Conjunctural Ethnicity and New Varieties of Ethnic/Racial Experience**

Black Mexicans emerged, unanticipated, in specific local contexts and a specific historical conjuncture. Different conditions elsewhere predict other unanticipated variations of conjunctural ethnicity, “theoretical cousins” to Black Mexicans (Marrow 2011; Massey 2008). Jimenez and Horowitz (2013), for example, document how middle-class Whites became the stigmatized minority in high-achieving, predominantly Asian suburban schools, contrasting “White fails” (Fs) with “Asian fails” (an A minus). In contrast to theories that would anticipate high-achieving Asians would become “honorary Whites,” Asian predominance and achievement gave them social power to set the social and academic hierarchy (Lee and Bean 2004; Lee and Zhou 2014). Similarly, where prior theory would anticipate Black association leading downward, an upwardly mobile meaning attached to Blackness in this time and place that led to Black Mexicans, a perhaps iconic variety of the racial/ethnic U.S. experience.

**DATASET, METHODS, AND STRATEGY**

*Ethnographic and Case-Based Analysis*

Carla, Valerio, and Linda were among about 15 Mexican American informants who identified in high school as Black in ethnographic interactions. I developed five of these into full, longitudinal cases in the NYCOMP dataset. NYCOMP is a three-stage ethnographic project. For Stage 1 (1987 to 1994), I worked with migrants and their children in Puebla (two months per year from 1990 to 1993) and New York (one to two days per week; every day when needed), doing about 100 interviews. In Stage 2 (1997 to 2002), my research assistants and I interviewed more than 100 children of immigrants and did regular fieldwork with 25 to 30 informants, including returning to Mexico with them and school shadowing. In Stage 3 (2005 to 2013), we re-interviewed about 80 of the Stage 2 informants. In Stage 1, I worked alone. In Stage 2, I introduced assistants into the community, then piggybacked on their relationships. In Stage 3, two researchers returned, doing about 20 interviews; I did the rest. I have known many informants since childhood, some since birth. In 2013 to 2014, I was in touch with all
three informants; I have been re-interviewing all DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) eligible informants. 17

The full NYCOMP dataset of children of immigrants was theoretically stratified when research began in Stage 2, including informants who were U.S. versus Mexican born, had or lacked citizenship or legal status, were in or out of gangs, boys versus girls, and other categories. Black Mexicans emerged as a category during research. We picked these cases because they were Black Mexicans and because their apparent prospects in high school varied: Carla’s future seemed bright, Linda’s uncertain, and Valerio’s worrisome. We followed cases with different starting points and watched, surprised, as all three lives unfolded into successful young adulthood.

We did about two weeks of ethnography with each student in New York in Stage 2. We shadowed Valerio and Carla in school for three to four days. We went to Mexico with Carla for two weeks. We interviewed Linda for four hours, Carla five hours, and Valerio 10 hours. We also interviewed Linda’s brother and parents, whom I have known for more than 20 years; two of Valerio’s siblings, and briefly, his mother, whom I have known 10 years; and Carla’s sister and parents whom I have known almost 20 years. I have known these informants since at least their early teens, have kept in regular contact, and become friends. Other Black Mexicans in the dataset include Valerio’s brothers. (Other Black Mexicans who were Valerio’s friends, and those in three other networks, are not in the longitudinal dataset, so there is no outcome data).18

This case-based, longitudinal ethnographic approach gleans insights that would be less likely using other methods. I documented, via direct observation and multiple interviews (offering related histories and accounts from informants and their friends and family), how racial and ethnic identities were experienced in situ across contexts, during adolescence and as early adults, and how these identities related to mobility (Black 2009; Duneier 2012; Weisner 1996). Hence, I reminded Carla, Linda, and Valerio of their Black adolescent selves when their successful early-adult selves initially remembered this less clearly than I had documented it. Shadowing Carla led me to note she did not interact with her neighbors but cultivated Black friendships. These data helped me develop coherent biographical accounts over time, triangulating my contemporaneous and retrospective data and accounts with those of Valerio, Linda, Carla, and their friends and family. The claim to validity is strengthened by the fact that Linda and Carla barely know each other and do not know Valerio. The patterns and meaning-making recurred in parallel lives, not because people told each other the same story.

Valerio, Linda, and Carla, as Black Mexicans, are theoretically unexpected cases for segmented assimilation theory, which oriented this research at its outset. Here, Black Mexicans were an “inconvenience sample” (Duneier 2012) of nonconforming cases. Explicating how these cases did not fit that theory yielded a retrodictive analysis describing the mechanisms by which Black Mexicans emerged (Duneier 2000; Knight and Winship 2012; Ragin, Nagel, and White 2004; Reskin 2003).

I use a case-based logic of analysis (often used in ethnographic and historical research), describing complex causality via case explanation.19 Case-based analysis seeks to consider simultaneously the combined effects of various factors, whereas net-effects analysis seeks to hold other influences constant to measure each factor’s net effect (Abbott 2001; Ragin 2008). Although there were relatively few Black Mexicans, Blackness’s larger positive impact was demonstrated throughout the NYCOMP dataset, which I will discuss next using net-effects analysis.

**NET-EFFECTS ANALYSIS: BLACKNESS, MEXICANNESS, AND EFFECTS OF RELATED PROCESSES ON OUTCOMES**

Case-based ethnographies often use unusual cases because they can expose usually hidden social processes. Even when analyzing “typical” cases, ethnographies usually highlight...
just a few cases, which is sometimes criticized as theorizing from outliers (Hammersley 1992; Smith 2010a). Setting that debate aside for now, this article advances a larger effort to develop methods to simultaneously analyze all ethnographic cases in a dataset. I use variable-oriented net-effects analysis (Abbott 2001; Ragin 2008) to determine how Black and Mexican practices and identities correlate with outcomes in the entire NYCOMP dataset.

The NYCOMP dataset has four outcome categories, listed in descending order here (see Table 2): (4) 17 percent attended competitive universities and graduate school, or were self-employed and earned high incomes (i.e., over $65,000; the highest income was $360,000); (3) 30.7 percent became college graduates/equivalents, with middle-class trajectories (incomes under $45,000); (2) 20.5 percent did not finish college but gained stable lives (incomes between $25,000 and $45,000); and (1) 31.8 percent earned less than $25,000 and had fewer than 12 years of education and poor prospects. This latter group also typically had undocumented status. These trends mirror Census data showing improving educational statistics among U.S.-born Mexicans in New York (see Table 1). Carla fits between the top two categories; Valerio and Linda fit into the mid/lower-end of the college graduate or equivalent category. All long-term undocumented informants fell into the bottom two outcome groups.

To determine how Blackness and Mexicanness relate to mobility, I coded all 98 cases for the presence (0 = no; 1 = yes) of Black/Mexican identity and practices identified in ethnographic data as possibly affecting mobility. Furthermore, I recoded data into two outcome categories, college graduate+ (3 and 4, above) and non-college graduate (1 and 2, above), to help discern and concisely explain statistically significant relationships. Table 2 shows that all of the few Black Mexicans were college graduates (\(p = .019\)). The table also shows that many ethnic and racial strategies and practices promoting Black Mexican mobility—Reskin’s (2003; see also Elster 1978) “how” mechanisms—were widespread in the dataset for non-Black Mexicans, correlating with high outcomes. Hence, 47.2 percent of the college graduate+ group had Black friends or used Black institutions (so understood by informants) to advance, whereas only 8.3 percent of non-college graduates did so (\(p = .000\)). No one moved downward via immersion in Black culture—by joining a Black gang, dropping out of school, or cutting classes with Black friends—as predominant theory would predict. Blackness here was strongly associated with better outcomes.

Mexicanness related to mobility and to Blackness in a more complex manner, as per Mexican conjunctural ethnicity in the late-1990s and early-2000s. Having non-Mexican friends at school was the norm for the whole dataset (77.1 percent) but linked more strongly (\(p = .000\)) with the college graduate+ group (94.7 percent) than with non-college graduates (56.2 percent). This is in line with Hamm, Brown, and Heck (2005) who report that cross-ethnic friendships help Black and Latino students academically. Conversely, having mainly Mexican friends at both home and high school was uncommon (28.2 percent), but only 5.3 percent of the college graduate+ group did so, compared to 54.2 percent of non-college graduates. Moreover, choosing a high school to be with your Mexican friends was uncommon (14.3 percent) and lowered outcomes (2.9 percent of college graduates+ versus 27.6 percent of non-college graduates). Purposefully avoiding high schools your Mexican friends attended was somewhat more common (33.3 percent; \(p = .009\)) and increased outcomes (46.9 percent of college graduates+ versus 17.9 percent of non-college graduates). These statistics reflect contemporaneous conjunctural ethnicity: many informants saw Mexicanness as negatively associated with school success. Hence, some academically inclined Mexican youth, often U.S.-born, selected high schools to avoid their Mexico-born, less successful co-ethnics, or their cousins, fearing pressure to cut classes or join gangs. Conversely, many
Table 2. Outcome Categories for Ethnic/Racial Friendship Practices in NYCOMP Dataset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic/Racial Friendship Practices</th>
<th>Non-college Graduate</th>
<th>College Graduate+</th>
<th>Total N (% of total)</th>
<th>Fisher's Exact P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Mexican (N = 88 cases)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (12.2%)</td>
<td>5 (5.7%)</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>47 (100%)</td>
<td>36 (87.8%)</td>
<td>83 (94.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Friends Led to Upward Mobility (N = 72)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3 (8.3%)</td>
<td>17 (47.2%)</td>
<td>20 (27.8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>33 (91.7%)</td>
<td>19 (52.8%)</td>
<td>52 (72.2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackness Led to Downward Mobility (N = 72)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>36 (100%)</td>
<td>36 (100%)</td>
<td>72 (100%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had Non-Mexican Friends at High School (N = 70)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18 (56.2%)</td>
<td>36 (94.7%)</td>
<td>54 (77.1%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>14 (43.8%)</td>
<td>2 (5.3%)</td>
<td>16 (22.9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainly Mexican Friends at High School and Home (N = 71)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18 (54.2%)</td>
<td>2 (5.3%)</td>
<td>20 (28.2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>15 (45.5%)</td>
<td>36 (94.7%)</td>
<td>51 (71.8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoided Mexican Friends in Choosing High School (N = 60)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5 (17.9%)</td>
<td>15 (46.9%)</td>
<td>20 (33.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>23 (82.1%)</td>
<td>17 (53.1%)</td>
<td>40 (66.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Went to Mexican High School to Be with Mexican Friends (N = 63)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>8 (27.6%)</td>
<td>1 (2.9%)</td>
<td>9 (14.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>21 (72.4%)</td>
<td>33 (97.1%)</td>
<td>54 (85.7%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Mexican teen migrants attended zoned schools for protection against Blacks or Puerto Ricans, and then cut school or stepped up to non-gang member Mexicans. These different meanings to Mexicanness help explain how it can be modestly related to both upward ($p = .108$) and downward ($p = .000$) mobility. Case data indicate the former meaning involved keeping the immigrant bargain; the latter usually involved gangs.

This nonrandom dataset cannot generalize to the U.S. population, but effects are statistically significant for all but two measures ($p < .05$). This illustrates the utility of using net-effects analysis within a larger, case-oriented ethnographic study to assess dataset-wide correlations. The numbers tell the same story as ethnographic analysis of the conjunctural state of Mexican ethnicity at the time, wherein Mexican youth sought Black mobility practices and post-civil-rights programs partly because contemporary Mexicanness had negative meanings. A publicly recognized Mexican culture of mobility had not yet emerged. Yet the theoretically anticipated association between downward mobility and Blackness failed to appear. This was not for lack of negative “Black” practices or images to adopt, because such existed. But these were mostly rejected because a key group (beyond legal status) linked to downward mobility—Mexican gangs—was itself premised on the idea of protecting Mexicans against Black or Puerto Rican aggression (even while fighting mainly other Mexicans [Smith 2006]). Rather, these Mexican students chose Blackness because it offered chances they did not think being Mexican would at that time.

### CASE-BASED ANALYSIS. BLACK MEXICANS: UPWARDLY MOBILE THUGS, COSMOPOLITAN STRIVERS, AND GOOD GIRLS

I analyze how each Black Mexican’s negotiation of ethnicity and race figured into school success and overall mobility, evolved over time, and engages theory. Valerio’s Blackness helped him embrace a “thug” identity while picking supportive contexts and avoiding the negative images of Mexicanness. Carla and Linda picked good schools and embraced positive images of good/smart Black girls. Supportive contexts and images reinforced a minority culture of mobility.

Conjunctural ethnicity theory posits that ethnicity can differ by context, which can vary throughout the day, neighborhood, and institution (e.g., school). Table 3 displays

### Table 2. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic/Racial Friendship Practices</th>
<th>Non-college Graduate</th>
<th>College Graduate</th>
<th>Total N (% of total)</th>
<th>Fisher’s Exact P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Ethnicity Led to Upward Mobility ($N = 72$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1 (2.9%)</td>
<td>6 (16.2%)</td>
<td>7 (9.7%)</td>
<td>.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>34 (97.1%)</td>
<td>31 (83.8%)</td>
<td>65 (90.3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Ethnicity Led to Downward Mobility ($N = 72$)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>13 (37.1%)</td>
<td>1 (2.7%)</td>
<td>14 (19.4%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>22 (62.9%)</td>
<td>36 (97.3%)</td>
<td>58 (80.6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Downloaded from asr.sagepub.com at Max Planck Society on May 30, 2014
informants’ starkly different school and home contexts. Linda and Carla lived in Community District 12, whose 2000 population was 65 percent White (largely Orthodox and foreign born), 14 percent Asian, 13 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent African American. Mexicans were 5.7 percent of the foreign born, behind China (15 percent), Russia (7.7 percent), Poland (7.4 percent), and Ukraine (6.2 percent). Languages spoken at home included Chinese (20 percent), Spanish (19 percent), Yiddish (16 percent), Russian (16 percent), and Polish (5 percent). Informants experienced their neighborhoods as Babylonian, parallel linguistic and cultural islands with few cross-group friendships. Girls were further restricted by parental limits on their spending time “on the street.” This made schools the primary site of non-family socialization; informants had few neighborhood friends.

In contrast to her neighborhood, Linda’s school was 86 percent Black, 9 percent Latino, 4 percent Asian, and 0 percent White. Carla’s school was 35 percent Black, 42 percent Latino, 16 percent Asian, and 7 percent White. Valerio lived in Community District 3—77 percent Black, 18 percent Latino, 1 percent Asian, and 1 percent White—but his Manhattan high school was 28 percent Black, 40 percent Latino, 23 percent Asian, and 8 percent White. As a boy, he could hang out at both places. Table 3 shows most students in all three schools were eligible for free or reduced lunch, suggesting minimal class differences. These statistics show that informants passed through dramatically different racial and ethnic contexts every day. Informants adapted their operating identities to these recurrent contexts, within the larger process of Mexicans establishing themselves.

**VALERIO: BLACK MEXICAN, THUG, U.S. SERVICEMAN**

Valerio’s negotiation of race and ethnicity embodies theories of conjunctural ethnicity and operating identity. He was a walking set of contradictions who ultimately succeeded. His Blackness emerged from his Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood friends (engaging the local context), his aversion to compromised Mexicanness (engaging the stage of settlement and meaning of Mexicanness), and the positive social options being Black gave him that being Mexican would have denied him: an operating identity that was respected, cool, a “thug” (his term). Valerio’s thug identity led him to be arrested “six or seven times”; he fought an off-duty cop; and he transferred schools after hitting a teacher. He graduated high school and attended college briefly. He then landed undercover government work, partly due to his thug look. Now in the military, his wife had their first child in 2010. His father’s education (some college in Mexico) and good income from restaurant work ($65,000 in 2006) helped him avoid conviction. At age 23 in 2006 (and still in 2012), he no longer felt Black: “I’m straight Mexican now.”

Valerio’s use of Blackness/Mexicanness reflects Mexicans’ early stage of settlement and public group recognition in New York, with his adopting different operating identities by context. Blackness was a street identity (Anderson 1999); Mexicanness a private/family identity. “I could be Black on the streets but culturally Mexican in my house. . . . [Mexicans] eat different things . . . talk Spanish . . . do prayers . . . the good part about being Mexican . . . they believe in God.” He worked briefly at his family’s Catholic church in high school. Nominally public, church was private for Valerio because he attended with his parents. But at school or on the street, he felt Black, and enjoyed its advantages while avoiding Mexican limits:

V: [I] don’t consider myself being Mexican because I don’t . . . hang out with Mexicans.

RS: What do you consider yourself?

V: Black . . . because I only hang out with Black people and Puerto Rican people . . . like being cool with other people . . . people don’t get along with Mexican people . . . because (they) act like they’re big . . . get into a fight, they always back down. . . . Mexicans (are) Herbs (wanna-bes).24
### Table 3. Selected School and Neighborhood Data for Three Black Mexicans Profiled

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Ethnic Group in School/ District</th>
<th>Valerio’s School</th>
<th>Valerio’s Neighborhood: Community District 3</th>
<th>Carla’s School</th>
<th>Linda’s School</th>
<th>Carla + Linda’s Neighborhood: Community District 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% African American</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Latino</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Free/Reduced Lunch or On Income Support in District</td>
<td>98%f free/reduced lunch</td>
<td>32.7% of district on income support</td>
<td>80% free/reduced lunch</td>
<td>98% free/reduced lunch</td>
<td>25.6% of district on income support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Rate</td>
<td>72%g</td>
<td></td>
<td>64%h</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Balance</td>
<td>44% male; 56% female</td>
<td></td>
<td>24% male; 76% female</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficiency (LEP) and Other Information on School or District</td>
<td>13% LEP</td>
<td>Lots of public housing, including projects. 19% owner-occupied buildings.</td>
<td>4% LEP</td>
<td>6% LEP (dual language in Haitian Creole); 20% recent immigrant students (entered United States in past 3 years); biggest % Jamaica 4.2; Haiti 3.1; Trinidad 2.1.</td>
<td>26% owner-occupied buildings. The 65% White pop. is largely Orthodox or born in Eastern Europe.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

*Data from NYS School Report Card (https://reportcards.nysed.gov/), for 2003 to 2004 entering cohort. All other data for this informant, unless otherwise noted, is from this source.

*bAll data for Community Districts are from the 2000 Census and American Community Survey (ACS), found in reports by the NYC Department of City Planning.

*cStatistics for cohort entering in 2001; NYS Report Card 2005 to 2006. All other data for this informant, unless otherwise noted, is from this source.

*d2003 to 2004 seniors (entered 1999); NYS Accountability Status Report 2004 to 2005 (https://reportcards.nysed.gov/). All other data for this informant, unless otherwise noted, is from this source. Accountability Reports and Report Cards are available on the same site.

*eReports for the years these informants graduated (early 2000s) are not available online, so I used the closest years available, and noted them.

*f2003–04 cohort.

*gGraduate rates for ethnic groups were the following: 66 percent African Americans; 68 percent Hispanics; 83 percent Asians; and 80 percent Whites.


*iBecause the school was closed and reorganized, there are no data available online on the school’s gender profile for students incoming around 2000.

+j2004 NYS Accountability Report.
Valerio used Blackness as an adolescent street identity to navigate what he saw as a dangerous world, where being Mexican was stigmatized and invited attack. (Valerio and his brother fought students in grade school who teased them for being Mexican.) Valerio’s descriptions of Mexicans and Blacks burst with reverse-accentuation effects (Bromley et al. 2004; Tajfel 1978), exaggerating the similarity of things within category and differences to things outside it.

Valerio’s mother vetoed his interest in Presidential High when a Mexican student Valerio’s sister knew was followed home from the school and killed by a Mexican gang. The effect of Valerio attending Comercio High instead of his zoned school (Presidential High, into which many Mexicans were funneled in the late-1990s and early-2000s) can be seen by comparing experiences of informants who attended other schools. I shadowed Valerio at Comercio and Federico at Graves High.25 Federico was less tough than Valerio, and Graves High had few Mexicans. But gang friends awaited him outside school.26 His social world seemed utterly bounded by being Mexican. To avoid Mexican gang problems, he walked around the school, rather than through the hallways, to some classes. Conversely, Valerio walked freely in Comercio High, greeting many friends. Federico lived in a parallel social universe where only other Mexicans mattered, whereas Valerio lived in Comercio’s full social universe.

I asked Valerio what would have happened had he gone to Presidential High. His answer highlighted the contemporaneous meanings of Mexicanness and Blackness in the local, institutional context: “At Presidential High I woulda been hanging out with Black people because I don’t like to hang out with Mexican people, because they . . . try to make people join gangs. . . . I woulda gotten into . . . fights . . . because I was not part of them (their gang). . . . I woulda (been) . . . expelled, kicked out.” Valerio’s imagined counterfactual sequence is confirmed by Esteban, who in his first two years at Presidential High hung out with Asian friends (he does not know Valerio). Esteban said: “Allota Mexicans didn’t like me because I wasn’t hanging out with them . . . immigrants in ESL classes . . . they’d look at me—with disgust—because they think I’m better than them because I didn’t have Mexican friends.” These students “grilled” (stared at) Esteban. He avoided fights by looking down. Conversely, Valerio said he never looked down. Indeed, when we first met he had 26 stitches in his arm from a knife attack by an “illegal . . . (who) looked at me.” Valerio and others present reported this attack as an “illegal” stepping up to U.S.-born Mexican guys. Valerio believed he could learn better at Comercio: “At Presidential I would . . . get into a fight . . . because I’m not in a Mexican gang.”

Valerio contrasted social and academic possibilities opened by being Black in Comercio with being Mexican in Presidential High: “People don’t make fun of you in your classes. If you act like you cool, like you’re a Black person, no one bothers you. But if you act . . . Mexican, you’re all big, some little kid steps up to you . . . you just back down . . . not good.” For Valerio, being Mexican meant beginning behind and having to prove himself. Being Black meant he did not have to prove anything:

V: Being Mexican is more . . . stressful . . . you hafta . . . be in a gang . . . rob people.
RS: To be Black? You have to . . .
V: . . . Relax, just talk to people.

Valerio saw himself as a popular kid who “knows a lot of people.” Being Black was a socially advantaged operating identity that helped him fit in and removed the need to fight to prove his coolness. Mexicans’ need to prove themselves reflects their conjunctural ethnic identity, wishing to establish themselves publicly, but wary of stronger Black or Puerto Rican gangs (Smith 2006). The knife attack echoes theories of intra-Black violence and ethnic replenishment: the most vulnerable—here, undocumented Mexican teens—closely
policied ethnic boundaries (Carter 2005; Jimenez 2010; Waters 1999).

Counterfactual cases cannot prove Valerio would have done badly at Presidential High, but we can strengthen the case by presenting a contemporaneous, roughly socially equivalent person—a proxy, a Mexican who hung out with non-Mexicans in the school Valerio avoided—whose experience echoes what Valerio thought would have happened. Esteban identified the same trigger—the “hard look”/“grill”—that caused the attack on Valerio and the same motivation: teen migrants perceived him as thinking he was better because he did not hang with Mexicans. Esteban avoided conflicts by looking down, which Valerio did not do. Moreover, Valerio’s causal theory that attending Comercio helped him prosper must be taken seriously, because the belief he would be constantly challenged at Presidential High was one cause of his later actions, including choosing a high school where he was not continuously stepped up to. This belief helped him pick a better school context, and it embodies the Thomas Theorem that a situation defined as real “is real in its consequences” (Merton 1995:380; Thomas and Thomas 1928). Esteban’s account suggests he was right. Similarly, Federico looked back (not down), and faced constant challenge at Graves High. A gang-inflected Mexican ethnicity was hyper-accessible at Presidential and Graves high schools, and constantly primed by looking back (Brubaker et al. 2004; Smith 2008). Valerio and his mother rightly anticipated that, as a Mexican with Black friends at Presidential High, he would have attracted challengers like electric charges attract their opposites.

At Comercio High, Valerio inhabited his Blackness without challenge, a socially advantaged operating identity. The friends we saw him interacting with at Comercio High and in his neighborhood were mainly African Americans, with some Latinos. They used “Yo, nigga” as a greeting or exclamation point: “Nigga, you gotta work at getting a 40!” on a test. Valerio called his friends “My niggas” in the same way other Mexican Americans we studied called friends “my boys” or “mis cuates.” Some friends were in the African American Bloods gang, which Valerio did not join. In Valerio’s classes, African Americans were a majority or plurality (17 of 19 students in one class; 7 of 18 in another, with 5 Latinos, 4 Asians, and 2 others; 11 of 16 in another). Just using “nigga” does not indicate Blackness. But Valerio’s embracing it, in this school, intimates its power for him.

Valerio’s Black thug persona nearly derailed his upward mobility. He and his friends planned on attending college, but they were casually oppositional, putting heads down on their desks. He did no homework. He sat in the back, talking, doing class work in his head, saying answers so only his neighbors could hear. Sitting in the back of the room, he and his friends intelligently discussed constitutional issues in the 2000 election, while the teacher scolded the class.

Valerio’s Black thug identity led him and his parents to choose Comercio High, enacting a minority culture of mobility by choosing a better public school and avoiding a school where they believed he would face constant step-ups. This choice saved him from himself: a dedicated guidance counselor transferred him to Alternative High School (rather than expulsion) after he hit a teacher. He graduated.

Valerio laughed when I reminded him, at age 23, of his prior Black identity. Looking back from early adulthood, he said: “Now I’m just straight Mexican . . . then I had this kid mentality that Black people were . . . so cool . . . rap videos . . . money. . . . I grew up with Black people. . . . We were . . . the only Mexicans on the block. . . . I would talk . . . act just like them . . . fighting (and) drinking. . . . I realized . . . that was not . . . who I am. I evolved . . . because I seen Black people are worse.” Valerio first saw Blackness as opening a thug identity to him, but then decided to become a self-described “Mexican thug.” He exchanged out-group for in-group accentuation effects, marking Mexicans as better. This moment shows one of long-term ethnography’s strengths: I drew on shared experiences to prompt Valerio’s reflection on at-first unremembered parts of his prior life.
Ethnicity’s meaning changed in early adulthood for Valerio. Soon after I stopped shadowing him, he reoriented his social life toward Mexicans. He and his brother delivered food with recent Mexican immigrants: “It taught us what it meant to be Mexican . . . hard work, low pay, no respect, people scream at you . . . Mexican school, Mexican 101. . . . We didn’t even know what ‘De que barrio?’ meant [laughs].” Valerio formed Los Catorce (The Fourteen), fighting mainly other Mexicans. Los Catorce anchored his life until his mid-20s. Mexicanness was highlighted in his fighting an off-duty cop, a Puerto Rican, who reportedly cursed “fucking Mexicans,” helping Valerio’s attorney get the charges dismissed. His parents pursued a minority culture of mobility by hiring a private lawyer—rather than depend on an overworked public defender—keeping Valerio conviction-free and his options open.

The salience and role of ethnicity in Valerio’s life evolved further after high school. He says being Mexican never hurt him at work, and speaking Spanish helped. His thug appearance—short pony tail and neat shape-up—led to undercover work. Government officials hiring him said, “you could be anything . . . Latino, Arab, Black.” Valerio earned over $70,000 in 2006. Interestingly, Valerio’s Mexican thug identity still pervades how he talks about ethnicity and race when recalling his life, but he less frequently enacts it as a young adult.

Valerio joined the military to break with his old life. “Tired of the fighting,” he did not want to seriously hurt someone or “go to jail.” Joining the military changed him “from being nothing to being something.” Valerio’s Mexicanness does not govern daily military life as it did in Los Catorce. While some superiors “are racial . . . only help people like them . . . I have higher ups that like me. It’s not always about color.” Ironically, Valerio became a military policeman (“I used to be a criminal!”). He likes the responsibility and discipline in the military, carrying a gun, and getting respect. “Many people fear cops . . . I am always respectful . . . I like it.” He agrees when asked if his desire to join an elite unit stems from the same impulse that led him to form Los Catorce—going from “street elite” (Katz 1988) to military elite. Mexican American fellow soldiers from California joke he is Puerto Rican, because he is tall, “from New York . . . they say I talk . . . Puerto Rican.” For these soldiers, Valerio falls between ethnic categories, his Mexicanness conflicting with his other traits.

CARLA: COSMOPOLITAN STRIVER

Carla’s Blackness stemmed from her desire to succeed and the settings and institutions into which this ambition brought her. She wanted to be a “smart, cool Black girl,” in middle school. In high school, she became a career-oriented cosmopolitan with the goal of going to a good college; ethnicity was only part of her identity. Carla’s Blackness and Mexicanness evolved as she matured and entered new contexts (college and work). She graduated from Elite University, works in a nonprofit helping poor women find work, and is engaged to her long-time, financially successful, Mexican American boyfriend.

Carla entered the United States in 1989, the undocumented six-year-old daughter of undocumented parents with six (father) and two (mother) years of education. Her father legalized himself via the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, and his family later, in 1996. Carla was 13 years old, so her status did not affect her thinking about college. Carla became Black in middle school to be “popular, be smart, and be top of the class academically.” Despite speaking no English when she immigrated, Carla did so well in grade school she was recruited into a special middle school where students did 6th through 9th grades in three years, entering high school as sophomores. Here, “Black kids” were the smart “cool girls . . . and cool boys.” Seeing herself as Black was an adolescent identity experiment: “because you’re a kid . . . it . . . becomes part of you . . . your identity. . . . I thought I was Black. . . . I learned to jump double Dutch . . . talking a certain way . . . stereotypical . . . Black.” She would tell her
parents: “These [Blacks] are my people [laughs]. My mother would get upset—’Your people are Mexican! . . . Don’t say that.’” Carla’s desire to succeed led her to embrace the Black culture of her peers in this accelerated program.

Carla answered my question, “Could [you] be a cool Mexican kid? Or did you have to be a Black kid?” by saying: “I didn’t really know what my identity as a Mexican was. It was . . . religion, church, God . . . being hard working. My mother always said ‘Your only responsibility is school—it’s your job . . . be good at it.’ Looking back, what actually saved us (was) my mother[’s] . . . awful stories about her childhood . . . no shoes, no school.” Like Valerio, Carla’s Mexican identity in middle school was expressed mainly at home and church, while her emerging, public, adolescent identity, embodying her ambition to succeed, was Black. Valerio’s Black thug identity helped him succeed, but it also challenged his parents, whereas Carla’s Black identity helped her keep the “immigrant bargain” (Louie 2012; Smith 2006), succeeding to redeem her migrant parents’ sacrifice, per her mother’s stories. Keeping the immigrant bargain as a “smart, cool Black girl” engages segmented assimilation theory by contradicting it. These dual operating identities—a Mexican immigrant’s daughter who succeeds by working hard, and a cool, smart Black girl—reinforce each other. Carla’s identity was Black and Mexican; she experienced each in different contexts through adolescence into early adulthood.

Carla’s operating identity changed in high school. Being popular was “too much drama.” With help from an assistant principal, Carla got into a Manhattan high school where few classmates applied. Carla wanted to attend a good college and get a good job. Given this emphasis on end goals, and a new high school context, the salience of different operating identities changed (Jerolmack 2007; McKay 1982; Okamura 1981). Carla’s Black identity receded as being cool mattered less: “I didn’t have to act Black. I just had to act smart.” But she used Blackness to develop friendships with the “smartest people . . . mostly Black people . . . [if] I needed help.” In Carla’s school career, most students were Black or Latino, with few Asians until high school. Her high school had more Whites (7 percent) than Linda’s school (0 percent), similar to Valerio’s (8 percent).

In high school, Carla primarily identified with “the special group” of students in honors classes. She thinks the school scheduled honors classes so “we never got to see the other kids, only during gym and lunch. But I never went to lunch.” Instead, she attended a program run in the library by a local university, because “I wanted to be somebody.” She began to “dress for the job you want, not the job you have . . . appearance is so important.” She recalled happily how the police stopped her for using her student MetroCard, thinking she was an adult using a student’s card for free subway rides. Her mother gave her a travel mug, making her feel even more like the professional woman she hoped to become.

Simultaneously, Carla’s Mexican identity began ranging beyond religion and home. She started socializing with her first explicitly Mexican friendship group who were not family. Like many co-ethnics (Smith 2006), her social life segmented in high school. An aspiring career woman with multi-ethnic friends on weekdays in school, on weekends “I was all about . . . [Mexican] parties . . . [with] my crew.” To protect her grades, she only saw “her crew” on weekends.30 Carla’s high school was cosmopolitan. Shadowing her, I saw she was well-liked, and ethnicity was not the main mental category for organizing teacher-student or student-student relations. Carla’s teachers did not know she was Mexican, only “Hispanic.” She and her friends did not discuss ethnicity much, talking more about school work, college admissions, music, and gossip. The school had many international students, and Carla’s friends included Blacks, Latinos, and children of immigrants (from Egypt, former USSR, and the Balkans). Teacher-student and student-student interactions were more respectful and friendly compared to other high schools we worked in. More class time was spent on demanding academic tasks and discussion,
and teachers focused on training the mind and fostering imagination of positive futures via hard work (Mehan et al. 1996). Miron and Lauria (1998) show practices in such schools do not racialize students and obstruct education, compared to typical practices in bad schools. In this context, Carla’s ethnicity was secondary to her identity as a striving student.

Carla got several college scholarships. Living at college, she faced a world of White privilege, feeling everyone else had read all the great books. To catch up, she shut herself “into my room . . . reading Plato.” Lonely, doubting herself, she faltered academically for the first time. Believing her elite college treated minorities as less capable (Garcia 2004; Massey et al. 2003), she felt stigmatized, “special” in the opposite way as in high school. She avoided Mexican parties, only seeing her boyfriend. I saw a stark difference in her demeanor. As a 12th grader, she had advocated vigorously and publicly for Mexicans to the New York City Health Commissioner, but she became waiflike speaking publicly to college officials.

Carla also became more fully a young-adult child of immigrants by taking on adult roles. During her first 18 months of college, she successfully defended her family from eviction by a new landlord; found a house and did the mortgage and closing; and advocated for her little brother at school. Family work and academic challenges wore Carla out, but she persevered, graduating with good grades.

Today, Carla counsels poor women reentering the workforce. She lives with her family and fiancé on Staten Island. Her neighbors are mainly Italian, with some Blacks and Puerto Ricans. She, her sister, and their parents share the mortgage. She rarely attends Mexican parties. Her social life focuses on family and church.

For Carla, the cosmopolitan striver, Blackness was a socially advantaged operating identity. Cosmopolitans value their ethnic and racial identities but do not see them as life determining. Rather, race and ethnicity matter more in some contexts or life stages, and become tied to family and religious life in adulthood. Retrospectively, Carla’s Black identity was clearly an early adolescent adaptation to context, in pursuit of academic success. She became Black because her school’s smart, cool kids were Black. That she later ceased to hold Blackness as a core identity, but in high school used it as a set of behavioral practices to facilitate her friendships with smart kids, highlights its utility as an operating identity. These uses of Blackness demonstrate the existence of an inner-city, Black/minority culture of mobility in mainly Black-Latino schools that can support an upwardly mobile, academically engaged student culture. Carla’s authentic, then instrumental, use of Blackness, and later abandonment of it, underlines the view of ethnic and racial identity as evolving with the life course and adaptive to context.

**LINDA: GOOD GIRL “TRYING OUT” BLACKNESS AND SUCCEEDING**

“I was not ashamed to be Mexican. I was trying it (being Black) out for four years because of the school I went to. The crowd I hanged out with was Black. . . . I was the only Mexican in my graduating class.” This is how Linda, at age 25, explained her adolescent Black identity. Never rejecting her Mexicaness, Linda embraced Blackness to “fit in” at what she calls “all Black” Central Brooklyn High (whose ESL program was Haitian Creole). She now identifies as “Mexican American,” not Black, but fondly remembers that time. Linda’s Blackness was less ambitious than Carla’s striver and less at-risk than Valerio’s thug. Linda attended a Black school partly because “not that good” middle school grades only got her into her zoned school, Central Brooklyn. Catholic school was too expensive. Her father feared Black students’ negative influence at Central Brooklyn, preferring her brother Sammy’s school, Presidential High. Her mother vetoed Presidential High, citing Sammy’s poor record there. She said: “One does not want to be racist against their own race,” but she did not want Linda to cut school and “hang out with the wrong crowd,” for example, Sammy’s Mexican friends. Her father relented,
despite Central Brooklyn’s reputation as, Linda said, “a bad, bad school.” Her mother’s “avoiding Mexicans” strategy preemptively isolated Linda from a negative Mexican peer group. Linda’s story reflects the negative meanings then attached to Mexicanness, the influence of local context on racial and ethnic operating identities, and the surprising flexibility to adopt operating identities to context.

Linda’s life is currently going well. Her parents feel she kept the immigrant bargain: a 2008 CUNY graduate (“Mom was crying”), she first found part-time sales work ($9 an hour; no benefits), but had full-time paralegal work in 2012, making $26,000 a year in 2014. Completing a second bachelor’s degree, she is considering a master’s program. She has been with her fiancé for several years. She has no children. Her father has six years of school and works in restaurants; her mother has nine years of school and cleans houses. Both parents came as undocumented workers, legalizing via the 1986 amnesty, and becoming U.S. citizens in the 1990s. In 2008, the family jointly bought a house on Staten Island. Linda’s high school social life centered mainly around Mexican parties with her cousins. Her Black friends were mainly school friends. She did not “know too many White people,” despite living in a majority White neighborhood.

Linda’s Blackness emerged from her Central Brooklyn friendships and limited “lockdown girl” freedom. Her mother called the house everyday at 4:00 to ensure Linda was home, whereas her less successful brother had nearly unlimited freedom. Her only after-school activity was going to the library with school friends. She stole an hour by telling her mother school got out later than it actually did. She described her high school friendship group (ten Black and four Puerto Rican girls): “All my friends are Black. No Mexican friends (at school). . . . I feel Black ‘cause I hang out with all Blacks. . . . I have allota things in common . . . same music . . . dress real baggy.” Linda’s brother and cousins started seeing her as Black after she enrolled at Central Brooklyn: “They say I talk all ‘ghetto.’ . . . You got all new words!” They gave her a “Black” name—Shanaynay — and asked her to explain Black music videos. Her relatives recognizing her as Black shows she had primed, and fit, their “Black” mental category, even if she was also Mexican. She felt no conflict, seeing ethnicity as situational and contextual (Brubaker et al. 2004): “I’m not saying that I think of myself being Black all the time. Sometimes I feel Black ‘cause I’m into Black music, and my cousins call me ‘ghetto’ . . . but I always consider myself Mexican.”

Linda’s Blackness facilitated her enacting an upwardly mobile, “starting over/avoid Mexicans” strategy, adapting to Mexicans’ conjunctural ethnicity. She used Central High to avoid downwardly mobile Mexican peers in Presidential High, then chose a high-achieving Black girls peer group she described as “cool.” Central High helped her because she “didn’t know no one” and could not cut school with cousins. We see a Black culture of mobility in her description of how Blackness helped her: “Believing I was Black helped me . . . by hanging out with people who did go to school and cared about it . . . would go to the library. . . . I saw them going to school and doing their work. We all had the . . . same classes . . . did our work. . . . I concentrated.” She contrasted this with her counterfactual imagined life at Presidential High: “I woulda been hanging with my cousins . . . bad influence. I didn’t wanna go through that road . . . because my parents depended on me to be the one in our family to get a degree.” (Sammy did not attend college.) Like Carla, Linda wanted to succeed to keep the immigrant bargain with her parents. She cut school three times (with her cousins), and her mother quickly arranged a “contact sheet” that would trigger a call to her if Linda cut again. Her deepening friendships with Black good girls at Central High “helped me achieve and graduate high school.”

Linda’s Blackness engages theory. Her mother feared daily contact with her Mexican cousins and teen migrants would impede Linda’s academics, as per segmented assimilation. But this theory’s required alternative—that integration into inner-city Black culture hurts
academically—did not happen. Neither Linda’s Black identity nor her friendships were oppositional. Linda and her Black friends gossiped about their schoolmates and college, went to MacDonald’s and the library, did their homework, and mostly respected parental rules. Looking back at age 25, Linda reports all her friends attended college, except two who joined the military. Only one had a child (with her fiancé) before graduating college. Her main weekday social life in high school was on the phone and online between her 4:00 curfew and her parents 6:30 return. These are not oppositional youth, but “good girls” who hang mainly with each other, while relating easily to less successful peers (Horvat and Lewis 2003).

Linda’s “trying out” Blackness in high school aptly describes an adolescent experiment in a Black high school, and an interestingly flexible notion of race and ethnicity as situational and coexistent: she never felt less Mexican; she just also felt Black. Her Blackness was strategic. She could have chosen an oppositional Blackness at her “bad” school, but instead chose girls who “did their work.”

Linda’s Blackness was a socially advantaged operating identity that helped her thrive socially and academically, and still be Mexican, without being oppositional.

Linda’s Mexicanness evolved in early adulthood. She fully embraced Mexican rituals that transnational life opened to her as a teenager (Smith 2006). Her Mexicanness was upwardly mobile, keeping the immigrant bargain. Linda now spends most of her free time at Mexican clubs or with cousins. Her friends at her first job after college at High End Department Store in Manhattan were mixed ethnicity; her closest friend was Albanian.

Describing her ethnicity’s place at work in that first job, Linda said, “I just act like myself . . . a High End Department Store employee. I do what I have to do . . . act normally.” She does not discuss her social life “on the floor” with customers, or with most co-workers. I asked her to compare her experience of Blackness in high school with her experience of self at work at High End Store. She said, “It’s not that kind of thing at work. I don’t feel like I should act a certain way.”

She does not feel being Mexican, Latina, or female affects her interactions with customers, who, she says when I ask explicitly, are “Whites . . . (who) pretty much expect everything” or they want a manager. But she said this is not due to ethnicity: “It’s because they are customers. I don’t think about it like that.”

Linda did not feel like a minority at work, because most workers were Latino, and ethnicity was not her primary identity there. Linda’s view reflected context and a life-course stage wherein her ethnicity was not the main factor in relationships. Rather, she acted like a High End Store employee; as one informant put it, describing his own identity management at work: “professionally.”

Mexicanness has been a key identity for Linda the entire time I have known her, but it is central in fewer contexts in early adulthood than it was in adolescence (Dannefer 2013). A Black identity helped her negotiate her “all Black” high school, as she befriended academically successful Black girls. Linda—neither striver nor thug—was a “good girl” whose Blackness was a socially advantaged operating identity in her high school. In new contexts, in early adulthood, she relies less on Blackness and more on her Mexican or non-ethnic identities.

Summary

 Conjunctural ethnicity considers how individuals’ racial and ethnic operating identities change over time and by context. Contexts can vary starkly within a single day, and navigating the life course moves one habitually into different contexts (Dannefer 2013). Table 4 shows how Valerio’s, Linda’s, and Carla’s ethnic and racial identities evolved from childhood to early adulthood in core content and salience by context and relative to other identities. Valerio was picked on for being Mexican in grade school, then embraced a tough Blackness and “avoiding Mexicans” strategy in picking a good high school. In 12th grade, he worked with recent Mexican-immigrant men—“Mexican school, Mexican 101”—and formed a gang, converting, he says, from a Black to a “Mexican thug.” His thugness then facilitated undercover work in early
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Up to End of Elementary School</th>
<th>Middle School</th>
<th>High School 1</th>
<th>High School 2</th>
<th>College Age 1</th>
<th>College Age 2</th>
<th>Beyond College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valerio</td>
<td>Mexican ID mainly private sphere, but he and brother fight at school because made fun of as Mexican.</td>
<td>Black identity begins to emerge. Gains salience with increasing time in public sphere. Mexican identity in private sphere.</td>
<td>Black Mexican high salience; strong dissociation from Mexican identity in public; private sphere still Mexican.</td>
<td>Changes from Black thug to Mexican thug ID with Los Catorce. Mexican identity grows in Mexican public sphere, Mexican parties.</td>
<td>Leaves off being Black Mexican; becomes Mexican thug. Generic thug identity aids in his work. Mexican ID not most salient at work.</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Mexican thug ID put into retirement in military, distancing from thug ID and life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>Mexican at home in private sphere; low salience.</td>
<td>“Smart Black girl” ID developed and highly salient in accelerated academic program.</td>
<td>Black ID used instrumentally, but not highly salient in her self image. Mexican ID more salient in Mexican public space (Mexican parties).</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>ID as a “minority student” feels thrust upon her, struggles academically. Retreats from Mexican ID/life to focus on school, but it grows with increased family responsibility.</td>
<td>Reconciles of self as successful student and more adult Mexican identity emerges. Spends most time with boyfriend and family.</td>
<td>Successful career woman, Mexican ID not highly salient in public; adult Mexican identity, time with boyfriend and family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Mexican ID low salience, mainly private sphere.</td>
<td>Mexican ID low salience.</td>
<td>Black ID high salience at school. Mexican ID high salience at Mexican parties.</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Black ID retired. Mexican salience high in Mexican public space, including in Mexico.</td>
<td>Same</td>
<td>Mexican salience low at work; still high in Mexican public space.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
adulthood. In the military, he is seen as a “New York Mexican.” Black Mexicanness was an adolescent phase Valerio outgrew, later adopting other kinds of ethnicity in new contexts and life phases.

Carla’s U.S. life began as an undocumented child whose Mexicanness was linked to home and church. Wanting academic success, she became a “cool, smart, Black girl” who could negotiate Black high school culture and Mexican parties on weekends. In college, she struggled briefly, disliked being a “minority” (Garcia 2004), but succeeded. Her Mexicanness was reinforced by advocating for her family in housing court. Her young-adult home life is Mexican, but her work identity is the professional woman she dreamed of becoming.

Ethnicity mattered little to Linda in grade school. Her Blackness developed in Central Brooklyn High via her mother’s “avoid Mexicans” strategy. The “only Mexican,” she befriended “good Black girls” who helped her succeed. Her Mexicanness developed in adolescent Mexican parties (Smith 2006). At High End Department Store, she identified as a young-adult professional who expressed ethnicity outside work. For each informant, the salience of ethnicity and race increased notably in adolescence and coexisted more equally with other identities in early adulthood.

Meanings of Blackness were also refracted through gender, and these identities had possible corresponding Mexican images. Why these other possible identities and images were not embraced is a useful counterfactual question. (I do not discuss alternative “White” images, because informants had few relationships with Whites and did not discuss them.) The Black thug image resonates with some dimensions of “cholo” or “ranchero” masculinities in emphasizing men’s ability to physically defend themselves and inspire fear in rivals (Bourgois 1995; Smith 2006; Vasquez 2010). But these Mexican masculinity images were delegitimized for Valerio by perceptions of contemporaneous Mexican weakness. As with Blackness, the lived reality of thugginess is surprisingly flexible. Valerio identified as a thug, but purposefully chose a high school that reduced the likelihood of fights. Using this Black minority culture of mobility tool, he chose a context that enabled him to inhabit the thug image without it derailing his future, as it likely would have at Presidential High. Valerio succeeded not because he sought to become “smart and good,” like the girls, but because avoiding Mexican powerlessness and seeking Black thug power led him into better schools, contexts, and outcomes.

Similarly, Linda and Carla both rejected available images of Mexican girls—at risk for dropping out of school and early pregnancy—to embrace locally accessible images of good and smart Black girls (Guerrero-Rippberger 2000; La Union 2010; Ochoa 2004; Smith 2006). They chose schools and friends that supported success more than Presidential High would have. Moreover, their Black girl friends’ freedom was restricted—like Mexican “lock down girls” (Smith 2006; Suarez-Orozco et al. 2008)—so socialization centered around going to and from the library. While they became smart Black girls partly due to lack of a ready peer group of such Mexican girls, their success made them Mexican success stories, keeping the immigrant bargain with their parents. These dynamics show operational identities as contextual, strategic, ethnic/racial choices affecting mobility.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This article (1) documented the social reality of Black Mexicans using long-term ethnography, doing analytic work other methods cannot easily do; (2) explained how predominant assimilation theory cannot accommodate Black Mexicans; and (3) offered new concepts—conjunctural ethnicity and operating identities—to aid the study of emerging U.S. racial and ethnic experiences.

I analyzed how some upwardly mobile Mexican adolescents adopted and later abandoned Black identity in early adulthood, and how Blackness also helped non-Black Mexicans. I used long-term case development to illustrate how and why Black and Mexican identities emerged and changed in three
contexts: local, institutional (e.g., schools); historical (e.g., intra/intergroup relations, state of settlement/establishment of Mexicans); and life course (e.g., movement from adolescence to early adulthood). This case-based, process-oriented approach contrasts with sociology’s usual reliance on whole ethnic-group identification, partly because the latter syncs best with net-effects logic and multivariate analysis (Alba and Nee 2003). My approach also illustrates the utility of using net-effects analysis within a larger ethnographic project, strengthening ethnographic analysis by simultaneously considering all cases. Obviously, these methods and dataset cannot formally estimate frequency or net effects for an entire population, but they can help us better understand how specific mechanisms work in a whole dataset, allowing one to reflect reasonably on how like groups in similar circumstances would behave.

I have shown how segmented assimilation cannot easily accommodate Black Mexicans. Segmented assimilation makes key contributions in analyzing how non-White identity and internal community structures can affect mobility, but in theorizing assimilation into native minority culture leading to downward mobility, it needlessly hems itself in. This article reopens that theoretical space in ways consistent with the theory’s goal, by examining empirical variation (successful Black Mexicans) and documenting how it emerged and affected mobility. I developed concepts of conjunctural ethnicity and operating identity—a sensitizing framework, adapting Blumer (1954)—for analyzing dynamic processes affecting identity and mobility in different contexts.

A key finding is that meanings of ethnic and racial identity, and their links to mobility, vary by context and can be affected by gender, legal status, or other factors. The expansiveness and slippage observed ethnographically in how Carla, Valerio, and Linda used the term “Black” yield insights about how they experienced race and mobility. Their variations of Blackness—thug, striver, and good girl—can all coexist with upward mobility. All described friendship groups as “Black” that included Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and others. Rather than imprecision, this conveys that “Black” describes both race and a broader social category, enacted via Black habits. My observations of their interactions with Black and Puerto Rican friends do not suggest Black students saw them as inauthentic “wanna-bes” (Carter 2005). I saw no adverse reaction to their using slang expressions and greetings (“yo, nigga”). Rather, these youths’ notion of Blackness included non-Blacks fluent in the hegemonic idioms of inner-city, Black culture. One Justice High student said, “Urban culture [is] Black, but you don’t have to be Black [to fit in, you] gotta talk [and] . . . act like them.”

This flexible conception of Blackness, combined with operating identities that change with the life course and different contexts, help explain how and why informants could adopt and later abandon Black identities. They moved from an adolescence (when ethnicity is highly relevant [Erikson 1968]) where critical social sites (school and neighborhood) were hegemonically Black social spaces, into an early adulthood (when ethnicity is less central) with non-Black and less ethnically defined social spaces and contexts.

Gender can magnify context’s effect on the race-mobility link by affecting school and neighborhood dynamics. Carla and Linda lived in mainly White neighborhoods (with insular linguistic and ethnic groups), but as girls could not “hang out” after school there, making their socially Black middle and high schools primary sites for socialization and public, ethnic identity formation. Valerio, as a boy, could hang out with Black thug friends in school and the neighborhood. This greater freedom outside of school helps explain why all the Black Mexican boys we knew enacted a Black thug identity, which acquired readier street traction.

Considering this with other studies suggests that academic success, gender, legal status, and—issues for future research—phenotype and other appearance/presentation of self factors can affect the race-mobility link. Waters’s (1999) West Indian girls and ethnic-identified boys did better in school, whereas Vasquez’s (2010) girls and lighter-skinned
boys got more flexibility in defining their ethnicity (school success was not considered “acting White”). Conversely, marginalized Black-identified boys enacted oppositional Blackness, policing it tightly by charges of “acting White”; phenotypic similarity makes in-group solidarity easier to enforce (Carter 2005). In contrast, successful Black Mexicans could adopt a hegemonic Black popular code at school and in public and a Mexican code at home. However, Mexican boys (Black Mexican or not) often faced challenges from recent undocumented teen migrants for hanging out with non-Mexicans, especially if they “looked Mexican” or attended a zoned, “Mexican” school (e.g., Presidential High). But phenotype here was not “looking Black/minority” but “looking Mexican” and was tied to perceived legal status (having citizenship) and was primed by dress and interactive style (e.g., not looking down) and what these implied (Smith 2013). All this suggests that ethnic and racial options may be more flexible for more successful youth who choose better schools to avoid conflictive contexts, and more limited if students face vulnerable co-ethnic newcomers who closely monitor ethnic and racial boundaries.

These findings have implications for current immigration policy. Making legalization impossible for most youth ties legal status and Mexican ethnicity closer together, especially in new destinations where more immigrants lack legal status. Hence, many less successful, undocumented youth leave school and enter young-adult contexts (e.g., labor markets) where Mexicanness clearly marks them as exploitable “illegals,” which could make ethnicity matter more in early adulthood.

Another question for future research relates to the role of middle-class status in mobility and ethnic and racial identity. Neckerman and colleagues (1999) posit a middle-class minority culture of mobility, and Portes and colleagues (2005) argue that middle-class status insulates youth from bad neighborhoods and schools. Only Valerio’s family was close to middle class; Linda’s and Carla’s families surely were not. A question arises: Is the link between ethnicity/race and mobility different for youth jumping over more of the class system, from poor to middle class? Moreover, what does “middle class” mean, concretely? Almost no parents in the NYCOMP dataset are professional or conventionally middle class (i.e., four-year college educations or commensurate jobs). Most parents advanced via long job tenure (e.g., in a restaurant). I call these families “multiple-earner middle class”: working adults live together, make modest incomes, and achieve a middle-class lifestyle by pooling earnings. Life course matters here, too (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008). Young-adult children’s earnings enhance family income for younger siblings. Hence, while older siblings grew up in a poor, immigrant family, younger siblings come of age in a combined first- and second-generation, multiple-earner, middle-class family.

**Conceptual Portability**

Are Black Mexicans an exceptional New York story? Will conjunctural ethnicity and operating identities help us understand emerging varieties of ethnic experience in other new destinations? Migration to new destinations with different local racial and ethnic systems offers opportunities to learn more about how newcomers and natives learn to recognize each other as group members (Nagel 2003; Wimmer 2008). The absence of “Mexicans” as a ready mental category held by non-Mexicans (Brubaker et al. 2004; Gil-White 2001), and contested negative images of Mexicanness among Mexicans, were part of Mexican conjunctural ethnicity in the late-1990s and early-2000s. Such youth embraced the category Black for its readier traction and more positive meanings (Carter 2008). These concepts are tools to analyze how new groups become publicly recognized in new destinations and their ethnicity assigned meaning.

The stance of local government critically affects what ethnicity and race mean. Compare New York City and Suffolk County, Long Island: During summer 2010, 13 hate-crime
attacks on Mexicans by Black youth were met with NYPD police and detectives swarming the area, meeting local Black leaders, finding the perpetrators, and calming rising intergroup tensions. Conversely, Latinos’ decade of complaints to Suffolk County police about attacks were often met with inquiries on the Latino victim’s legal status (Holthouse 2009). Local youth went “beaner jumping”—beating Mexicans—for sport, murdering Ecuadoran immigrant Marcelo Lucero in 2008. At minimum, ethnicity and race will have more enduring meaning where the state delays or refuses to prosecute such crimes, especially in new destination areas with many vulnerable undocumented immigrants.

Black Mexicans could emerge in other places with sizeable minority middle classes or an established Black/pan-minority culture of mobility, fostering a conjunctural ethnicity to accommodate new immigrants and the second generation. Indeed, pan-minority youth culture, resonant with Black youth culture, promoted upward mobility among second-generation youth in New York (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Ocampo 2011): cross-ethnic friendships link to more academic orientations among Black and Latino students (Hamm et al. 2005). Minority cultures of mobility should emerge in places offering more opportunity. Black Mexicans benefit from living in New York’s mainly Black and Latino social worlds that offer some successful youth and supporting social institutions (Alba and Nee 2003; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Mollenkopf 1999; Smith 2004, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). Conversely, upwardly mobile Mexicans in the rural South are sometimes resented by Blacks (Marrow 2011). Mexicans moving into cities with fewer middle-class than poor minorities (e.g., Philadelphia) could be more influenced by the latter, while the more successful could seek opportunities as Black Mexicans via a minority culture of mobility. Surprising cross-cultural communities have emerged elsewhere. For example, common segregation and religion fostered generations of “Mexipino” culture (Mexican/Filipino) in San Diego (Guevarra 2012).

We can view Black Mexicans as one surprising example of newly emerging varieties of the U.S. ethnic and racial experience from the recent great migration, kin to Jimenez and Horowitz’s (2013) high-achieving Asians who established themselves as top status holders relative to lower-achieving White, middle-class youth. With more New York–born Mexicans coming of age and succeeding academically, a New York Mexican culture of mobility is emerging—for example, Carla’s little brother attends an elite public high school, and high school and college attendance rates for New York–born Mexican youth rose from 2000 to 2010 (as per Table 1)—although explicating it is beyond the scope of this article (see Smith forthcoming).

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms. Pseudonyms are unique throughout my written work. Hence, “Linda” here is the same “Linda” who appeared in Mexican New York (Smith 2006).

2. Alba and Nee (2003; see also Perlmann 2005) argue that Mexicans’ overall slow progress hides intragroup variation, but they fear effects of low education levels and widespread illegal status (Bean and Stevens 2003).

3. This master framing prevents segmented assimilation theory from using biculturality to explain native minority upward mobility, as it does to explain upwardly mobile Cubans (bicultural with the White mainstream) and downwardly mobile Marielitos (bicultural with the rainbow underclass). But could Marielitos become bicultural into upwardly mobile Cuban or White American culture? Or vice versa?

4. Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller (2005:1002) argue that a minority culture of mobility is “strictly theoretical” and would mainly help the middle class, but the Black Mexicans’ families discussed here are working class, and most were undocumented at some point.

5. Lu (2013) analyzes how Chinese music schools not only teach children how to play instruments, but act as places where community cultural capital is created and shared, including information about which schools are good, and how to get children into them.

6. Less successful youth than the three chronicled here may not enter into new contexts as they age, or may enter work contexts where ethnicity matters more—for example, undocumented youth working in restaurants—and thus have a different experience. This idea will find traction with the notion of “turning points” in the life course (Elder 1985; Rumbaut 2005) and the recurrent contextualization of Dannefer (2013), which are beyond the scope of this article, but will be considered in the larger book written from the NYCOMP dataset.

7. Census and American Community Survey (ACS) data in Table 1 show the native-born population increasing relative to the foreign born, and native-born educational trajectories improving dramatically more than those for foreign-born Mexicans. Both the 2000 Census and the 2005 to 2009 ACS show only 6 percent of foreign-born Mexicans age 19 to 23 in New York enrolled in college, whereas native-born Mexican Americans increased from 32 to 51 percent enrolled in this time. Similarly, foreign-born 16- to 19-year-olds enrolled in high school increased from 53 to 59 percent, whereas natives increased from 88 to 92 percent.

8. In survey projects I did in 2002 (N = 571) and 2011 (N = 726), most Mexican immigrants were undocumented and stayed that way for many years. The 2011 sample shows over 93 percent of those in New York up to 10 years were undocumented, as were 73.5 percent with up to 20 years in New York. After more than 20 years in New York the rate falls to 46.2 percent, reflecting the window to legalization opened by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, but slammed shut since. The surveys, done in the Mexican Consultate and in public places such as soccer fields, could draw from a skewed sample, because many who come to the Consultate are seeking some kind of Mexican identity document. But that so much of the sample shows long-term undocumented status suggests how hard it is to move out of undocumented status, yielding a larger undocumented population (Smith and Seguro Popular Team 2012).

9. Butterfield (2004) and Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters (2004) found that 12 percent of Puerto Rican and 13 percent of Dominican youth identified as Black, but also that 4.4 percent of Colombians, Ecuadorians, and Peruvians did so.

10. Most people from the Mixteca region of Mexico, from whence my informants (and most Mexicans in New York) come, are relatively short in stature, with high cheekbones and straight black hair, although there is more variation in New York and in the Mixteca than this image suggests. The Black Mexicans profiled here looked phenotypically “Mexican,” although Valerio took pains to distance himself from this image. I think Valerio and Carla said they looked more light-skinned than other Mexicans in New York partly to differentiate themselves from that indigenous image. My impression is that while many roughly correspond to this “indigenous” image, more would appear “mestizo,” combining indigenous and Iberian features. Fewer would appear “White” or “Spanish.” Clothing and demeanor also affect how “Mexican” one is perceived to be (Smith 2013).

11. Suttles (1968) shows how some young men controlling public space can define that neighborhood ethnically, even if most residents are not co-ethnics.

12. On priming in social psychology, see Crocker and Quinn (2004). For sociological uses of the term, see Brubaker and colleagues (2004); Quillian (2006); and Smith (2008).

13. On code-switching, see Anderson (1999); Carter (2005); Cerulo (2002); DiMaggio (1997); Portes and Rumbaut (2001); Rampton (1995); Vaughan (2004); and Waters (1999).

14. A “shape up” usually rounds out lines of hair on the forehead and trims sideburns and hair on the back of the head. One can also have more intricate patterns cut into the hair. This is different from a fade haircut, where the hair is shaved at the base of the hairline and gets thicker as it moves upward. One informant contrasted the shape up with the “bowl haircut of my Tio [Uncle] Juan.”

15. Girls did not embrace the arguably corollary image of the Black male thug—the Black teen mother—
because the ready image of early motherhood in rural Mexico and among their parents was available. Getting pregnant was one way of being Mexican (Guerrero-Rippberger 2000), while images of upwardly mobile second-generation Mexican women were scarcer.

16. See Brubaker and colleagues (2006); Brubaker and colleagues (2004); Cerulo (2002); DiMaggio (1997); Gil-White (2001); Heimer (2001); Jerolmack 2007; Lamont and Molnar (2002); and Swidler and Arditi (1994).

17. Between stages, I did maintenance ethnography (e.g., attending baptisms).

18. Valero’s older brother graduated high school, did not like college, and dropped out. But he earned $50,000 in 2008 working as a driver in a union job with good advancement opportunities, in a company where one can earn up to $90,000 within a few years, so I coded him as a 3, college graduate equivalent. His younger brother makes little money, but was in college and doing well, so I coded him a 3 as well for his trajectory. We ethnographically observed two youth (unconnected to developed cases in the database) and at least five other friends identifying as Black Mexicans, but we lack outcome data on them.


20. I thank Wei Ting Lu and Tommy Wu for their help in first analyzing these data. I coded all interviews and entered data in the database, and ran the final calculations in 2013.

21. These incomes are roughly consistent with Current Population Survey 2005 to 2009 figures showing 22 percent of U.S.-born Mexican households in New York City made more than $75,000 in 2009, and 22 percent made less than $20,000. Median household income was about $62,000 for native-born Mexicans and about $39,000 for foreign-born Mexicans. Among U.S.-born Mexicans in New York, 40 percent have a bachelor’s degree or higher, whereas only 5 percent of foreign-born Mexicans do (Bergad 2010). Two-thirds of individuals in my dataset are U.S.-born.

22. All cases were coded by the author during January 2012. While all cases were coded, not all cases presented data on all practices or mechanisms. A particular practice or mechanism was coded only where it was specifically present or absent. Hence, using Black friendship groups or institutions (e.g., Black fraternities) was noted only where the subject reported it. The link between upward/downward mobility and Black or Mexican ethnicity was coded only if the subject remarked on it in some way or it was clear—for example, Mexican youth who joined a gang to defend themselves as Mexicans, and derailed their school careers by doing so. Subjects were coded as choosing a Mexican high school if they reported picking their high school so as to be with Mexican friends; they were coded as avoiding a Mexican high school if they reported picking a school to avoid where their Mexican friends or relatives went, usually because they feared it would derail their educational careers.

23. Coding into two categories—college graduates and non-college graduates—makes good conceptual sense of the data and is also efficient. I used Fisher’s exact test (rather than the Chi Square test) in computing deviation from the null hypothesis because this test calculates significance exactly, from the data themselves, and does not posit a sample with normal distribution or make parametric assumptions about the sample, as most tests do. Fisher’s is the indicated test if any cell in a contingency table may be less than five, as is the case in this analysis (see also Institute for Digital Research and Education 2014). (For the story of how this test was developed, see Salsburg 2002.)

24. “Herbs” act tough but do not back up their talk with action (see also Dance 2002).

25. Frederico’s experience at Graves high resonates with student descriptions of Presidential High. The principal of Presidential High denied me access for this study, presumably fearing publicity over the killed student. I have interviewed at least 10 students who attended Presidential High at this time.

26. The New York City Board of Education reported about 50 Mexican students among nearly 2,500 total students (about 2 percent) (New York Board of Education data, obtained in hard copy in the 1990s). This was not a “Mexican” school.

27. “De que barrio?” is gang slang, meaning “What neighborhood/gang you from?” As understood by gang members, it challenges you to declare your allegiance and take the resulting beating, or “herb out” and say you are not with anyone. This framing creates a conundrum for individuals not in a gang, because it looks like you are lying to avoid a beating if you claim no affiliation. An instant discernment process by the numerically superior group occurs to determine whether to believe the stranger or inflict the beating. A working paper on this process, “Racial Science on the Street: The Sociology of Step-Ups,” is available on request.

28. Valero does not have a Puerto Rican accent in Spanish, but he may sound Puerto Rican to Mexican Americans from California.

29. My data show increasing effects of illegal status on older teens (Gonzales 2011). Other work noting effects of legal status include Menjivar 2008; Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008; and Zhou and colleagues 2008.

30. The corner boys and college boys in Whyte’s Street Corner Society ([1943] 1999) faced similar choices.
31. Her mother also rejected her cousin’s school, Justice High. Marcelo, an informant who attended Justice High, hung out with mainly Chinese friends from middle school, did well academically, and was in student affairs, told me getting grilled by newcomer Mexicans “was a constant thing.”

32. “Shanaymay” was a character created by comedian Martin Lawrence for his television show in the mid-1990s.

33. This raises the question of whether anyone can participate as a legitimate member of this hegemonic Black culture, or any such hegemonic youth culture. Could Whites be “Black” in the same way as Mexicans are here? Part of the answer is that it depends on local context and history, and the relationship between people and their friends.

34. It also highlights boys’ more limited choices for Black images. Even Valerio’s academically successful friends enacted the thug image.

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