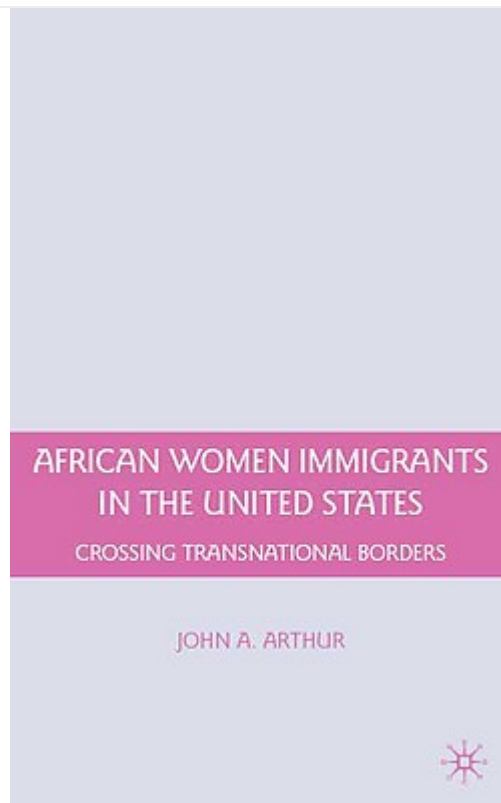


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## African Women Immigrants in the United States: Crossing Transnational Borders



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Reviewed Work(s)

African Women Immigrants in the United States: Crossing Transnational Borders. By John Arthur (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Pp. 244. Hardcover, \$80.00.

This important sociological study explores the much overlooked and largely misconstrued analysis of the transnational migration of African women to economically advanced nations. John Arthur draws attention to the experiences of West African migrant women in the United States by unraveling the complex social, economic, and cultural processes by which these women negotiate new identities and construct meanings from their migratory experiences. The main objective of the study, which the author successfully achieves, is to demonstrate that West African women are “not passive and mere appendages of their male migratory counterparts.” On the contrary, they are active and independent players “responding to the same geopolitical, economic, and social forces at the core of the movement and transfer of human capital and labor from the developing to the developed world” (2). Arthur offers a compelling argument that West African women use international migration and agency as strategies to achieve economic empowerment, challenge traditional norms and rigid gendered structures, attain self defining autonomy, and forge new identities and alliances across geographical centers.

The greatest achievement of this book relates to the manner in which the author challenges conventional wisdom and expands the scope of the literature on African global migrations. Previous scholars explained African women’s migrations to the West from a male-centered/patriarchal perspective. Migration theorists, for instance, represent African women as dependent and passive migrants, arguing that African women’s migratory decisions are largely influenced by men who migrate to global labor and economic centers. Arthur questions this assumption in a persuasive manner and calls attention to the lack of gender sensitivity in migration studies. The development of a gendered and interdisciplinary focus suggests a promising approach for understanding and generating questions on African transnational migrations. The wide range of qualitative and quantitative data used in the study is not only substantial, but also convincing. Information gleaned from the United States Census records, particularly the

Integrated Public Micro-data series attests to the ways immigrant women construct their identities within the United States. In addition, the study includes ethnographic data collected from West African immigrant women residing in the Midwestern cities of Indianapolis, Saint Paul, Omaha, Saint Louis, and Des Moines. The personal narratives enliven the study, demonstrating how African women continue to bridge the gender gap in migrations to the West.

The easily accessible introduction – containing detailed chapter summaries and methodological notes – sets the tone for the rest of book. The seven chapters outline specific themes related to migrant women's experiences. Chapter two focuses on rural-urban migration and inter-regional migration within West Africa and constructs or positions them as an inevitable response to deteriorating economic and political realities. The chapter paints a portrait of African women not as victims, but as autonomous social actors on the move, who engage in these forms of migration to achieve economic goals and challenge patrilineal domination. In Chapter three, the central chapter of the monograph, Arthur proves his ability to elucidate on the transcontinental migration of West African women using empirical evidence, migration models, and data on the settlement patterns of African female migrants in the United States. The borrowed theoretical models – such as the human capital model of migration and the push-pull model of migration – highlight economic goals as the chief catalysts for West African women's migration to the United States.

Chapters four to seven amplify the voices of West African women immigrants. Chapter four describes the grave political realities in war-torn countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone and their adverse effects on women and children. The touching personal narratives reveal how the memory of war lingers. This chapter also shows the “cultural paradox” that haunts the dreams of refugee women: They view America as a land of opportunities, yet they contend with the dynamics of racial, class, ethnic, and gender tensions. Using migrant women's increased participation in domestic service in Missouri as a case study, the author shows African women migrants as undeterred by racial stereotypes and anti-migrant sentiments, carving a niche for themselves through labor force participation.

The question of how African women construct meanings from their identity as Black female migrants receives adequate attention in chapter five. One of the ways by which migrant women make meaning out of their experience is through the formation of transnational networks. These networks connect migrant women with extended family members in their home countries and with other people of Black ancestry within America. The fluid and cross-cultural identity these women create help deconstruct notions of an invisible Black cultural experience. It is puzzling to the reviewer that Arthur fails to acknowledge the tensions that exist between West African female immigrants and African Americans in their pursuit of economic goals and higher standard of living.

Chapter six investigates migrant women's occupational structures and labor force participation. The two case studies serve as pointers for understanding how migrant women deal with the complex issues of race, class, and identity. The first case study explains African women migrants' contribution to the farm labor economy in the states of Missouri, Minnesota, and Nebraska. The chapter portrays female migrants as mobile workers engaging in constant secondary migrations in search of better labor opportunities. The second case study sheds light on the experiences of educated migrant women and their survival strategies. The next chapter turns to a controversial subject: immigrant fertility behavior. Arthur acknowledges the complexity involved in studying the fertility behavior of women who straddle between fertility ideas prevalent in Africa and those practiced in the United States. Overall, the study suggests that certain considerations such as economic and educational objectives shape the fertility behavior of West African women. Some refuse American models of fertility, with an appreciable number increasingly shifting to pronatality.

The strength of this study partly derives from the author's ability to map out research gaps in the literature on African migrations. Arthur calls for a shift from a male-centered perspective to a gendered perspective in explaining African women's migratory journeys to the West. Future research on Black immigration, he argues, should develop theories on the transnational familial networks established by Black immigrants and explore the ways in which they engage in political activities in their countries of origin as well as in their host countries. The concluding

chapter includes plausible recommendations that political leaders and policy makers will find useful for formulating immigration policies. Overall, the book is well written, constructed with a jargon free and powerful prose strong enough to hold the attention of advanced readers and the general public. It acknowledges previous scholarship, but it represents a novel departure in the narrative on African migrations. One wishes that the author would have explored indepth the debates on the concept of the “feminization of migration.” It is interesting to note that the book does not provide a fully developed analysis on the effects of US immigration laws in the post-9/11 era on African migration. These minor objections, however, pale in significance to the contributions of this piece of scholarship.

The book will appeal to scholars in a variety of academic fields, such as sociology, history, demography, geography, foreign policy analysis, and ethnic studies.

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