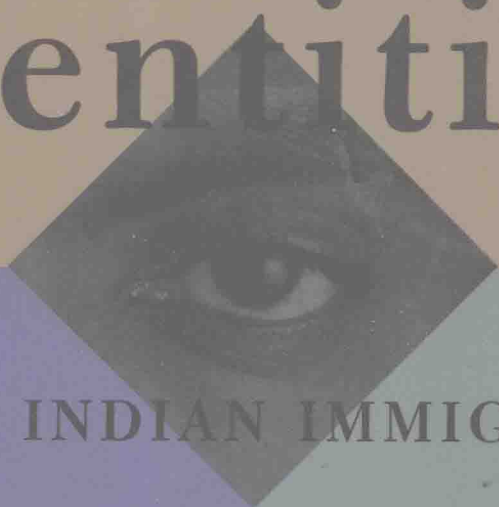


black identities



WEST INDIAN IMMIGRANT

DREAMS AND AMERICAN

REALITIES



MARY C. WATERS

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BLACK IDENTITIES

**WEST INDIAN
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BLACK IDENTITIES

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INTRODUCTION

1

I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, in the 1960s and '70s. From 1971 to 1975 I took the subway from my parents' home in Flatbush to my high school in the neighborhood of Park Slope. The neighborhoods of Brooklyn were changing rapidly during those years. Social scientists would describe these changes as white flight, rising immigration, and the growth of black neighborhoods through blockbusting and panic real-estate selling by whites. My own experiences of these changes were less complicated. As a teenager I saw the neighborhood "becoming black." While my liberal parents welcomed the diversity and I felt no fear about this change, I watched with some sadness as my friends and their families quickly bought houses in Long Island or New Jersey, and as the white immigrant neighborhoods of Jews, Italians, and Irish became Puerto Rican and black neighborhoods.

The daily subway trip to high school gave me direct experience of these changes for four years. The subway stops along the IRT were literally changing color, and with each year the complexion of the people boarding the cars would change. I would board at the all-white end of the line at Flatbush Avenue. The next stops—Newkirk, Beverly, Church, Winthrop, Sterling, Park Plaza, Brooklyn Museum, and Grand Army Plaza—changed swiftly during those years. By the time I graduated, only Flatbush Avenue riders were white and the riders boarding at the rest of the stops through Flatbush were black, until one reached the gentrified neighborhood of Park Slope at Grand Army Plaza.

What I did not understand at the time was that, for the most part, it was not black Americans who were moving into these neighborhoods but

black immigrants from the Caribbean. The fact that they were immigrants was invisible to me because the only characteristic I noticed about them was their race. It was only years later as the Caribbean presence grew in New York that white New Yorkers began to notice the immigrant backgrounds of the newest black New Yorkers. By 1990 foreign-born blacks made up 4.8% of the entire U.S. black population, but in New York City, where black immigrants are highly concentrated, the immigrants numbered 23% of the city's 1,847,049 non-Hispanic blacks.

One of the ways in which New Yorkers came to recognize the West Indian immigrants in their midst was through their tragic involvement in some of the worst incidents of racial violence in New York in the 1980s and '90s, including the Howard Beach killing, the Korean grocery store boycott in Flatbush, and the Crown Heights riots. In 1987 the Queens neighborhood of Howard Beach became notorious overnight when 23-year-old Michael Griffith, who had immigrated from Trinidad when he was 5 years old, was chased to his death by a white mob. In 1990 a much publicized boycott of a Korean grocery in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn came about because a black customer claimed she had been treated disrespectfully and then attacked by the Korean grocery-store owner. The woman, 46-year-old Jiselaine Felissaint, was a Haitian immigrant. In August 1991 in the Crown Heights neighborhood, a 7-year-old child, Gavin Cato, who had immigrated earlier that year from Guyana with his family, was struck and killed by a car driven by a Hasidic Jew who was part of a motorcade escorting the leader of the Lubavitcher Hasidic sect. A crowd of people gathered, many of whom believed that the black boy had been ignored by the first emergency vehicle—owned by a Jewish ambulance service—that responded to the accident. The crowd became enraged, and as the evening went on demonstrations and riots and looting began. As a result 163 people were arrested, 66 civilians and 173 police officers were injured, and 28 police cars were damaged. A 29-year-old Australian rabbinical student named Yankel Rosenbaum was stabbed to death.

In all three cases the national press reported the racial angle—blacks vs. whites, blacks vs. Koreans, and blacks vs. Jews. The fact that each incident involved an immigrant was sometimes reported in the local New York press, which heightened New Yorkers' awareness of the transformation in

the demographics of blacks in the city. But, outside of the city, the immigrants were “invisible” in press accounts. The Crown Heights riots were reported in the press and perceived by many residents as growing out of black and Jewish relations. However, Crown Heights is an unusual neighborhood composed of about 90,000 Caribbean immigrants as well as 35,000 African Americans.¹ While press reports at the time went to great lengths to identify the Hasidic sect of Judaism as the ethnicity of the Jewish people involved, the West Indian immigrants involved were usually referred to as “blacks.”²

The invisibility of the Caribbean immigrants as immigrants and their visibility as blacks are part of the story I want to tell here.³ The questions and ambitions that motivated this study come out of my experiences, both personal and academic. I wanted to tell the stories of people who have been invisible to white America and who now live where I grew up. I wanted to understand the experience of immigration—one that is very strongly a part of my family’s history and a part of the fabric of the neighborhoods I remember from my childhood and for those who live there now. I originally framed the study around two basic theoretical questions aimed at understanding the experience of the immigrants in light of what I knew about the experiences of earlier waves of white immigrants and their children.

I begin by describing these early framing questions because I think they reflect assumptions and approaches I shared with most Americans who have thought at all about the experiences of black immigrants, and because as I conducted my study, I learned that the assumptions I first held were misguided in many ways and were based on incorrect notions of what the terms immigration, race, ethnicity, and identity meant for Caribbean immigrants.

Initially I had wanted to ask how similar or different is it to be a black immigrant or descendant of immigrants in Brooklyn in the late twentieth century from what it was like to be an Irish, Italian, or Jewish immigrant in the earlier part of the century? How useful are the old social psychological theories of immigrant assimilation for understanding the non-Europeans who make up the newest Americans?

I had wanted to “test” the theories sociologists had for understanding the assimilation process for white immigrants to see which parts fit the

experiences of black immigrants. But that question assumed that race was the key defining difference between what happened to earlier waves of Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants and what was happening to Jamaican, Barbadian, Trinidadian, and Guyanese immigrants. There were some similarities between the two waves of immigrants—the earlier European immigrants and the current Caribbean immigrants came to make a better life for themselves in the United States, both waves of immigrants came with optimistic hopes and beliefs about becoming American, and both waves came primarily as economic migrants, not refugees. Yet many other factors have changed the process of immigration between these two periods.

The changed technology that links sending and receiving societies, the proximity of the Caribbean to the United States, and the interpenetration of the economies and societies of the West Indies and the United States all transform the process of migration itself. The recent immigrants do not make the abrupt change from one society to another that early models of assimilation (often erroneously) ascribed to European immigrants.⁴ In fact, some authors have suggested abandoning the ideas of immigration and assimilation altogether, adopting instead the notions of transnationalism and diaspora culture to explain the experiences of recent migrants.⁵ While I believe that some who describe immigrants as “transnational” actors are exaggerating the extent to which current immigrants maintain ties across national boundaries and the extent to which earlier waves of immigrants did not, I discuss in Chapter 3 the ways in which a simple dichotomy between “before” immigration and “after” immigration does not fit the experiences of the people I studied.

The consequences of “becoming American” have also changed. As I worked on this study during the last decade, a number of new models for understanding the experiences of post-1965 immigrants have been developed. The standard models of assimilation that were used to explain the incorporation of European immigrants described a process where becoming American was coupled with economic incorporation into the society. The more “assimilated” people became, the more economically successful they were. The generational march of assimilation meant that poor immigrants became working-class ethnics and then over time successful ethnic Americans.