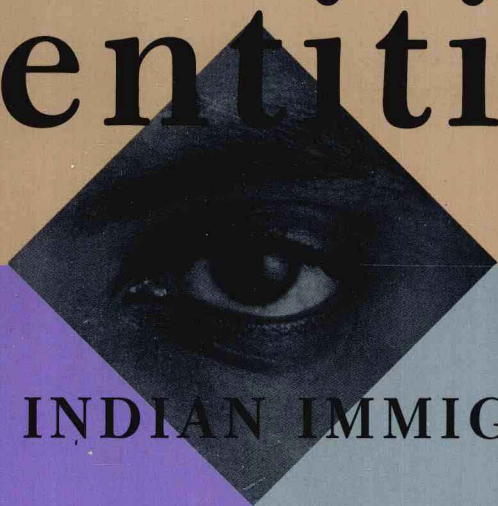


black identities



WEST INDIAN IMMIGRANT

DREAMS AND AMERICAN

REALITIES



MARY C. WATERS

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BLACK IDENTITIES

**WEST INDIAN
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AND AMERICAN
REALITIES**

RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION

New York

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England

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Printed in the United States of America

Second printing, 2001

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Waters, Mary C.

Black identities : West Indian immigrant dreams and
American realities / Mary C. Waters.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-00067-6 (cloth)

ISBN: 0-674-00724-7 (pbk.)

1. West Indian Americans—Ethnic identity.
2. West Indian Americans—Race identity.
3. West Indian Americans—Cultural assimilation.
4. Immigrants—United States—Social conditions.
5. United States—Ethnic relations.
6. United States—Race relations. I. Title.

E184.W54W38 1999

305.896'9729073—dc21 99-33813

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I find that when I try to write I am productive and enjoy the process about 5 percent of the time. The other 95 percent is pretty miserable. I am either producing bad drafts that are better destroyed, going down false alleys, worrying that I have nothing new to say, worrying that what I do have to say is wrong, or just plain wishing I was doing something else. Something easier. As a result I would never have produced this book without a lot of help. I needed encouragement that it was worth doing, money to do the actual work, support in the field, time to write, experts to help me get the facts right, friends to help me decide which drafts to keep and which ones to destroy, and, above all, a life apart from the book to help me keep the whole thing in perspective.

I was lucky to find encouragement and money, although I could have used more time. A fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation allowed me to analyze my data and begin the process of writing. A small grant from the Milton Fund at Harvard gave me the opportunity to get started and a sabbatical at Harvard years later permitted me to finish the writing. The bulk of the project was supported by the Russell Sage Foundation. The Foundation's president, Eric Wanner, saw the potential in this project from the beginning. He funded the project and gave me a year at the Foundation to work on it. He asked intelligent and informed questions that enriched my thinking and the work, and was extraordinarily patient in waiting for the finished product. The staff at Russell Sage were spectacular and made it a pleasure to come to work every day. Thanks especially to Lisa Nachtigall and Eileen Ferrer. Though I was supposed to be writing while at Russell Sage, I was actually doing research in the field that year. All of the scholars who were there listened to my tales from the field over lunch and helped me to think through issues I needed

to ask about. Robert Merton was very enthusiastic about the project and gave me enormously helpful feedback on an early draft of a chapter. Larry Aber's knowledge of adolescent and child development opened up a new field for me to consider. Eroll Rickets was a gracious "native informant" who shared his scholarly insights and his own experiences as a Jamaican immigrant with me. Christopher Jencks and Jane Mansbridge not only listened to me at lunch, they often cooked me dinner and, together with Nathaniel, helped me to make sense of everything I was learning during the day.

Many other scholars encouraged, corrected, and inspired me. Herb Gans was enlisted by Eric to review my grant proposal, and his enthusiasm and guidance at an early stage greatly improved the study design. I owe a special debt of gratitude to the late William Alonso. He always thought this was a terrific project, gave me wonderful feedback on my ideas and my writing, and was a good friend. As a beginner in the field of Caribbean studies I was very lucky to meet Nancy Foner—she shared her work and expertise with me, kept me from making several errors, and, most important, became a good friend. I also got to know Phil Kasinitz because of our shared interest in West Indian immigrants. Little did we know that we would become experts on certain aspects of China as well! Phil shared his expertise on both parts of the world with his characteristic good humor. Phil and John Mollenkopf and I started another project together long before this one was done. As a result they both became cheerleaders for me to finish, and our discussions about the second generation in general shaped many of my ideas about second-generation West Indians in particular. Thanks especially to John for some last-minute computing.

Many other scholars provided advice and feedback on parts of the manuscript, gave me encouragement and support, shared their published and unpublished work, and greatly enriched my ideas. Thanks to Richard Alba, Frank Bean, Roy S. Bryce-Laporte, Steve Cornell, Jennifer Eberhardt, Karl Eschbach, Gary Gerstle, Nathan Glazer, Joyce Hamilton, Nazli Kibria, Micheline Labelle, Michele Lamont, Bonnie Leadbeater, Stan Lieberman, David Lowenthal, Peter Marsden, David Mittelberg, Sue Model, Kathy Newman, Orlando Patterson, Joel Perlmann, Alex Portes, Reuel Rogers, Ruben Rumbaut, Theda Skocpol, Yasemin Soysal, Niobe Way, John Western, Franklin Wilson, William Julius Wilson, Flore Zephir, and Ari Zol-

berg. Several people gave detailed comments on the entire manuscript. Thanks especially to Roger Waldinger, Marilyn Halter, Doug Massey, Peggy Levitt, Monica McDermott, and Naomi Schneider. Of course, all of these great minds did not always agree with me. I learned a lot from our disagreements, and I am responsible for the mistakes that remain.

I gave talks based on this research at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Toronto, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of California at San Diego, Columbia University, McGill University, the University of Montreal, Tufts University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale University, the University of Washington at Seattle, Northwestern University, the New School for Social Research, Brooklyn College, the City University of New York Graduate Center, Williams College, the Jerome Levy Institute at Bard College, Massachusetts General Hospital, and Cambridge City Hospital. At Harvard I also spoke at the Du Bois Institute, the Center for International Affairs, the Medical Anthropology Program, the Center for Kibbutz Studies, the Murray Research Center, and the Center for Population Studies. I am sure I would have finished much sooner had I stopped talking so much and spent the time writing, but I am also sure that the dialogue with all of the scholars and students I met at these talks, too numerous to mention here, greatly improved my thinking and my writing.

A project of this scope and time frame also includes many other people who worked on it. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my research assistants who conducted interviews, ran data, went to the library, and challenged and enriched my thinking. They include Kayode Owens, Jimmy Phillipe, Diana Davis, Lisa Walke, Crystal Byndloss, Mendis Brown, Cheryl Ault, Maxine Robertson, David Porter, Patricia Blackburn, Laurie Dance, Joe Swingle, Faustina Haynes, Nancy Lopez, Amy Chin, Sarah Song, and Monica McDermott. Several Caribbean-American students at Harvard did their senior theses on one or another aspect of this topic and greatly influenced my thinking on the subject. Thank you to Maggi Apollon, Rhonda Edwards, and Charissa Latabaudiere. The preparation of the manuscript and early drafts and chapters was greatly aided by Lynne Farnum, Suzanne Washington, Mary Quigley, and Liz Gardner. Suzanne Washington also helped me by ferrying all of the tapes to the transcribers whom she found—Brian and Carmen Berenty.

Michael Aronson at Harvard University Press gave me useful feedback on the manuscript. He and David Haproff at the Russell Sage Foundation worked very hard on the many details of copublication. Richard Audet did a terrific job copyediting the manuscript.

Portions of Chapter 4 appeared as “West Indians and African Americans at Work: Structural Differences and Cultural Stereotypes” in Frank Bean and Stephanie Bell Rose, eds., *Immigration and Opportunity: Race, Ethnicity, and Employment in the United States* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 1999). Portions of Chapter 5 appeared originally as “Explaining the Comfort Factor: West Indian Immigrants Confront American Race Relations” in Michele Lamont, ed., *The Cultural Territories of Race: Black and White Boundaries*, copyright © 1999, The University of Chicago Press and Russell Sage Foundation. All rights reserved. Parts of Chapter 6 contain material that is a substantially revised version of “Immigrant Families at Risk: Factors That Undermine Chances for Success” in Alan Booth, Ann C. Crouter, and Nancy Landale, eds., *Immigration and the Family: Research and Policy on U.S. Immigrants* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 1997). Portions of Chapter 8 appeared originally as “The Intersection of Gender, Race, and Ethnicity in Identity Development of Caribbean American Teens” in Bonnie J. Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way, eds., *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). Other parts of Chapter 8 appeared as “Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second Generation Black Immigrants in New York City” in Alejandro Portes, ed., *The New Second Generation* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 1996).

I am always amazed when I begin interviewing at how open, trusting, and honest people can be. I hope I have done justice to the people I interviewed for this book by presenting their views honestly and fairly. I am extremely grateful for the time and energy these strangers invested in this project. I owe a very special debt to Mrs. Owens and to Kusil Moorley for their help and guidance in the field.

There were times when my writing was in its infancy that only very close friends were allowed to see it. Carolyn Boyes Watson helped me sketch out the structure of the book on a napkin at the Au Bon Pain and endured years of almost daily phone calls about the book’s progress. Chris

Williams read early drafts and told me not to throw them out and shared her amazing secret to getting work done, “just do it.” Jim Jasper read the whole book and gave me detailed and insightful comments that greatly improved the book and moved it forward when it was stalled.

Many other friends were there to give me encouragement and diversion. Thanks to Mark Boyes Watson, Bahaa Fam, Carol Nowacki, Sandy Waxman, Lucia Benaquisto, Steve Rytina, Martin Button, Judy Auerbach, Helen Schwartz, Robert Halliday, Kwok Kian Woon, Steve Cornell, Deb Umberson, Rose Frisch, Francois Ramaroson, and Luna Razafinary.

My family as usual provides a healthy diversion to matters academic as well as unusual amounts of support and aid. My brother Michael first sparked my interest in this subject when he was teaching in Brooklyn and getting to know his West Indian students. My mother, Margaret Waters, offered a ton of help—contacts in the New York City schools, advice on how to approach the Board of Ed, comments on drafts of chapters, and advice about what to wear at all times. I took all of her advice except the latter. My father, Michael F. X. Waters, was an active observer of the research and writing process, and always showed his belief in my abilities to do just about anything. My mother-in-law, Kay Bayly, was always supportive and interested. My sister Margaret bore the brunt of local support duties as she lives nearby and is a world-class editor and negotiator. My sisters Liz, Anne, and Joan were pressed into sibling-in-service roles on the project more than once. In addition, my brothers and sisters, my in-laws, and my nieces and nephews clipped articles from newspapers that might have been related to the project, put me up when I came through town, lent moral support, and, most of all, helped to divert me throughout the years from anything approaching a single-minded approach to this project. Thanks to Mary Kay Bauer, Tom and Sheila Waters, Joel Robbins, Thomas Battle, John Waters, Pat Cusanelli, Steve Bayly, Linda James, Joan Higbee, Cathy Higbee, Matthew Higbee, Brendan Waters, Savannah James Bayly, Cecelia Waters, Nora Cusanelli, and Sullivan Waters.

My daughter Katie’s arrival came long after we expected her. Yet in retrospect her timing, like everything else about her, is perfect. Her imminent arrival forced me to work hard on finishing the book, and her delayed arrival allowed me to actually finish it, since everything always

takes longer than one thinks. Her presence in our lives brings us enormous joy and renews my passion for the work contained in this book. Ending racial discrimination and celebrating our common humanity are the goals that led me to this work in the first place. My love for my daughter makes these lofty goals all the more personal and urgent.

I could fill several books with all of the ways I should acknowledge the contributions of my husband, Ric Bayly. Suffice it to say he played a crucial role in making the book happen, he plays the central role in my life, and he is a very good man. I dedicate this book to him.

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