A Means to An End: Articulations of Diasporic Blackness, Class and Survival among Female Afro-Caribbean Service Workers in New York City

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By

Christine A. Pinnock

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Christine A. Pinnock

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Anthropology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

A Means to an End: Articulations of Diasporic Blackness, Class and Survival among Female Afro-Caribbean Service Workers in New York City

By

Christine A. Pinnock

Advisor: Donald K. Robotham

A Means to an End: Articulations of Diasporic Blackness, Class and Survival among Female Afro-Caribbean Service Workers in New York City examines the personal narratives of female Afro-Caribbean immigrants who migrated to New York City and from 1961-2008 and entered the U.S. labor sector by via the service sector. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over two and a half years and comprising of interviews of more than thirty participants, this research departs from traditional gendered labor approaches by not solely studying Afro-Caribbean within the context of work and political economic categories but engages the daily lived experiences of Afro-Caribbean women outside of work to present intimate portraits of the women in the spaces they live, namely the Northeast Bronx.

Through the articulation of complex identities surrounding diasporic Blackness, the multiple class identities informed by privileged class statuses in the Caribbean, this dissertation analyzes Afro-Caribbean women’s re-negotiation of identities around race, class, gender, and culture. This work examines the challenges to migration; the exploitation and sexual abuse that occurs when women are undocumented; and the adverse impact on Afro-Caribbean women’s health as a result of working in the service sector performing as domestics, healthcare workers,
food service workers, and retail workers. This research reveals that whether one is undocumented or documented the lack of affordable healthcare options leads to significant health issues, and the process of becoming documented requires Afro-Caribbean women to reconfigure new identities and new ways of seeing themselves in the world. By privileging the oral histories of Afro-Caribbean women, we learn the multiple ways class travels across Caribbean spaces and is performed by the women and the men who share their lives. Ultimately, the means to an end involves creating new endings as the goals to obtaining financial security doesn’t always yield positive results regardless of one’s immigration status.
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Table of Contents

Introduction: Articulations of Identity among Female Afro-Caribbean Service Workers in New York City.................................................................1

Chapter One: How Dem Reach? Afro-Caribbeans and Caribbean Spaces in the Northeast Bronx .......................................................................................................................35

Chapter Two: All Dis Way Afro-Caribbean Narratives of Migration Across the Caribbean Diaspora ..........................................................................................................................58

Chapter Three: Inescapable Racism: An Introduction to the Entanglements of Race, Diasporic Blackness and Identity..........................................................115

Chapter Four: Class Travels and Traveling to Class: Exploring the Complexities of Class, Gender Politics and Identity among Afro-Caribbean Women in New York City 154

Chapter Five: Afro-Caribbean Women Laboring in New York: A Means to An End ...192

Conclusion: A Means to an End: Was It Worth It?.............................................................243

Appendix A..........................................................................................................................256

Appendix B ..........................................................................................................................261

Bibliography......................................................................................................................267
Introduction: Articulations of Identity among Female Afro-Caribbean Service Workers in New York City

**Ethnographer’s Reflection: The Beginning—Childhood**

As a child I have distinct memories of visiting my maternal grandmother at her job on the Upper West Side. My grandmother and father did not get along, so there was an unspoken arrangement between my parents: my mother never told my father when we were going to visit grandma, and I gathered he never asked. As children, my mother never even told us when we were going to visit grandma, but I knew anytime we went to summer concerts at St. John the Divine, or went to see the Paperbag Players in Central Park, at some point, seeing my grandmother on those days was inevitable, and I couldn’t wait!

My excitement was always tempered by the strangeness of our encounters with my grandmother at her place of work. She seemed like a completely different woman when she visited our home. On the few occasions my grandmother came to visit us at home, she wore sunglasses under a white wide brimmed hat, usually paired with a pristine white pants suit with wide legs, and a stylish clutch, or shoulder bag with wedge shoes or sandals. Standing on the radiator, I would strain to look out the living room window, waiting for her arrival. When she finally came into sight, you saw this petite woman walking up the street looking like she belonged on the cover of a fashion magazine that I never thought of her as anything other than a magnificent tour de force. From the way she spoke and carried herself, I only thought of her as this classy lady who had the etiquette and manners of royalty.

Although she was a trained teacher in Jamaica, she worked as a domestic for an elderly white woman, who I only knew as Julia. Our visits with my grandmother typically occurred
when Julia had a doctor’s appointment and would be out for a few hours. On the few occasions that Julia was at home, our visits always began the same as if Julia was not there. My mother would bring me, my older brother, and older sister to the door and before we could ring the doorbell, the door opened and my grandmother, dressed in a drab colored dress would hurriedly, yet quietly usher us into the kitchen. This was quite strange for me as a child because I was always accustomed to being entertained in the host’s living room, but Julia’s living room was off limits. Julia’s living room was on the left as you entered the apartment and as my feet naturally gravitated towards the immaculate space for entertaining guests, my grandmother quickly redirected me to the kitchen to join my sister and brother. I would not be served a glass of soda or cold apple juice while sitting on plastic covered sofas. I would not get to trace my little fingers along the plastic vinyl seams that met along the arm of the sofa, seams that framed my brown legs and dug into my skin the longer I sat on couch cushions. I would not get to fidget as the plastic sofa covers stuck to my skin while I played with flat round plastic covered decorative pillows in Julia’s apartment.

Instead we sat on hard stools and chairs around a small table in the kitchen while my grandmother served us cold sardines and crackers and peppered us with questions about school, the stories in the children’s bible she gave us, and if we chewed our food forty one times before swallowing, and the importance of a good diet to have good digestion and bowel movements. My grandmother could assault you with questions in the most seamless and sophisticated way that she would have made any interrogator for the KGB or CIA proud. Years later, when I was a teenager and my grandmother became blind, I attributed her inquisitive nature to her lack of sight and even felt so when I went away to college. By my sophomore year reflecting on my childhood after a year of Black Women’s Writing courses and African Diasporic history, I
thought differently. I recognized that because my grandmother performed live-in domestic work for a living her free time was limited to talking on the phone. The questions allowed my grandmother to catch up on all the events and aspects of our personal and academic lives that she’d missed. More importantly, I learned that she had many sides to her, and that she looked different when she visited us than when we visited her, because she was performing in a different capacity, one of many.

Ethnographer’s Reflection: The College Years

It was the mid-1990s and I was an undergraduate home for the summer working as a reading tutor at BMCC (Borough of Manhattan Community College at the City University of New York. At the time, the plazas and parks in the area were sprinkled with the Black faces of women from the Caribbean tending to white and Asian children. I can recall my ire being raised when one day standing in line to buy coffee at McDonalds I saw a small child at the counter no more than three or four years old yelling at his nanny because he wanted to know what she did with HIS change. To calm him, the nanny showed him the few dollars and placed the money back in her pocket for safe keeping. To top it off, he called by her first name! I was livid! I didn’t know this woman but I knew that her children, if she had any, couldn't talk to her that way without being disciplined. It also occurred to me fresh off two years of undergraduate coursework in African Diasporic history, slavery, and African and Caribbean women’s literature, that this woman most likely wasn’t rearing her own children as she worked as a nanny taking care of somebody else’s children. I was so angry I immediately sat down on a bench in the plaza in front of BMCC and wrote a performance poetry piece about the incident and about the other women I knew who performed domestic work for a living. I went home later that day
and told my mother what happened. She replied with a heavy sigh followed by an even more pregnant schewps (sucking her teeth). “Hmph the things these women have to do and put up with in this country because they not straight! This country is something else, America is something else! Hmph!”

I was still in my late-teens and didn’t quite understand the magnitude of what my mother was referring to regarding women having to put up with certain situations because they weren’t straight, which meant the women did not have a green card or working papers. My grandmother was sponsored by her employer, and currently that option is a thing of the past. If an Afro-Caribbean woman couldn’t get employer sponsorship, she either tried to have a family member file for her, or married for a green card, or just did without. The latter option is the most arduous and difficult one. Back then I couldn’t fathom what living undocumented really meant. Now almost 20 years later having lived a bit more life myself, and even after more than two and a half years of fieldwork, I have some insight but can never truly know the challenges of survival. I now realize that the “doing and putting up with” due to an unstable immigration status is a common reality for many domestic and service sector workers. Living within the circumstances of constant uncertainty is just one aspect, the emotional, financial, psychological and physical toll that uncertainty takes is very substantial so much so that many Afro-Caribbean women wonder if it was worth it in the end especially when these women look back on what they left behind. The decision to travel to the United States and ‘come all dis way’ is a sacrifice many Afro-Caribbean immigrants don’t easily make, especially if one already had a stable life. Once these Afro-Caribbean women get here they are faced with even greater sacrifices and it is the identities and values that they carried with them that help them survive.
Introduction: Bringing the Nation with Them: Afro-Caribbean Service Workers in New York

This research focuses on female Afro-Caribbean service sector workers in New York City and their narratives of survival. Drawing on oral histories and personal narratives this project serves to understand Afro-Caribbean women in the broader context of their lives and not solely within the context of performing labor in the workplace. By analyzing Afro-Caribbean women’s oral histories we are able to recognize the ways Afro-Caribbean women articulate their challenges with immigration, negotiate class identities, and navigate racialization in New York within and outside the context of work. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over two and a half years and comprising of interviews of more than thirty participants, this research project is intervening at a very prescient time in which Afro-Caribbean women working in the service industry performing as domestics, healthcare workers, food service, and retail workers are virtually ignored in national discourses on immigration reform, healthcare reform, the shifting labor movement and the growing service sector. The passage of the Affordable Healthcare Act in 2010 allowed for millions of Americans to have access to affordable healthcare but for millions of undocumented immigrants, their access has been denied. Afro-Caribbean women are a segment of the undocumented immigrants working in the United States contending with invisibility; but their faces defy the gendered stereotypes of undocumented workers in the United States because they are not Latin American and are not men, therefore their narratives are absent from local conversations, but are integral to global discourses on immigration that ignore Black bodies in motion.

Existing scholarship on gendered labor, while immensely valuable to the discipline of feminist anthropology is limited in its attention to the totality of women’s lives. This preoccupation held by many scholars to situate women of color working in the service sector
solely within the context of work serves to recognize and attend to the intersectional challenges present in the work environment. However, such approaches overlook the lived realities of women of color, ignore the multifaceted identities that women of color occupy and perform outside of the context of work, and elide the cultural differences among Black ethnics. The Afro-Caribbean women in this study are mothers, daughters, partners, church members, and community members who embody multiple class positions in the Caribbean diaspora which reflect the class positions they had in the Caribbean and the class positions they perform now.

This research attends to the challenges that Afro-Caribbean women face living in New York and working in the service sector. It explores the complexities of diasporic Blackness as women migrate with their own understandings of Blackness tied to the Caribbean nation, and the internal contestations of negotiating diasporic Blackness in the United States. While immigration scholarship focuses on the pathways to becoming documented, this project situates those pathways within a feminist anthropological lens that addresses the obstacles that Afro-Caribbean women encounter such as domestic violence, negotiating gendered and racialized identities, and the limited employment options beyond the domestic-healthcare pipeline that has been the mainstay for Caribbean women for over fifty years in the United States. My research contributes to feminist anthropological scholarship by calling upon it to recognize that in order to sufficiently attend to the gendered labor contributions of Afro-Caribbean women who sustain private realms and families while performing domestic work and sustain public and private realms performing healthcare work, we must understand that their lives extend beyond the boundaries of work. It is through the intimate portraits of the experiences, identities, and cultural traditions that sustain them as Afro-Caribbean women that we know the means to an end goes far
beyond finding work; it is daily sacrifice of being here as documented and undocumented Afro-Caribbean immigrant women and the high cost that is paid.

The challenge of writing a project of this nature is not due to a dearth of ethnographic material on service workers, but being able to capture Afro-Caribbean women’s lives in a way that does justice to their histories, their present experiences and the visions they have of the future. To understand the challenges of immigrant women of color in the United States, traditionally transnational scholarship was the theoretical thread used to weave together women’s lives. Transnational scholarship prior to the late 1970s and early 1980s primarily focused on the experiences of male migrant workers, with very little attention to the families and lives the men left back in their home countries. This gendered engagement of immigration and transnational scholarship not only neglected the experiences of female migrants but also ignored the gender-specific challenges experienced by female immigrants who were often times leaving one society that was structured by gender inequity to enter the United States or other hostlands structured by the gender inequity.¹

Embedded in the transnational scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s was an implicit understanding that immigrants and women had to physically cross borders in order to have racist or racialized experiences that they would not otherwise have. Even recent scholarship on Afro-Caribbean immigrant experiences continues this misrepresentation, by assuming that the racialization and understanding of one’s Blackness² is something that Afro-Caribbean immigrants only experience once they are confronted with and treated with a racialized

² Blackness is capitalized throughout the dissertation because it is refers to the complex condition and experience of being Black that moves beyond limited engagements of Blackness associated with ethnicity and race.
understanding of Blackness that is specifically associated with African Americans. What these scholars miss is that Afro-Caribbeans migrate with their own notions, understandings and articulations of Blackness that have nothing to do with being categorized as African Americans shortly after their arrival and immersion into United States society.

The participants in this research migrated with their own understanding of Blackness that is specifically tied to the Caribbean and Caribbean colonial histories. These Afro-Caribbean participants migrated to New York filled with hopes and dreams of creating better realities than the ones they lived at home. Along with their aspirations, the participants themselves are vessels filled with histories, cultural and personal experiences that are intimately tied to the nation and how they saw and continue to see themselves within the nation. Aside from a few participants, most of the participants in this study migrated from Caribbean countries with African descendant people as the majority population. Many of these participants, though excited about the prospects of Barack Obama in the White House, had already voted for a Black prime minister, and if he or she wasn’t Black, they gladly cast their vote in their post-independence nations to the rewards of citizenship and freedom from former colonial powers. In that light, their presence in the United States, and specifically New York City is representative of their respective Caribbean nations and an association and identification with that nation which allows for the creation and maintenance of Caribbean diasporic ties, networks, and cultural traditions. As an ethnographer recognizing and respecting the participants as citizens of the Caribbean meant that I valued these

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Afro-Caribbeans; and that recognition and attentiveness provided me with access, although my ability to enter their spaces was not always easy.

One’s ability to gain access to the private realms of Afro-Caribbeans means one must be vetted and be able to prove her Caribbean-ness through the knowledge, performance and articulation of Caribbean cultural nuances through food, language, dress, mannerisms. My vetting took place every time I encountered someone from the Caribbean who was a prospective participant. My ability to speak in Jamaican patois, or with a Caribbean accent was the initial step to being accepted as a “real” Jamaican even though I was not born there. If I chose to disclose that I was of Jamaican parentage, it was usually after a participant inquired “which part of Jamaica yu come from?” My reply began with laughter and then with a straight face, “de Bronx.” The response was always the same, “OOOOhhh “yu ah yankee! But yu nuh talk like yu ah born ah foreign?!” My ability to lapse into and out of patois or code-switching was and continues to be very intriguing to most Afro-Caribbean people I meet. My ability to code-switch so effortlessly was always a point of fascination for male participants particularly among men in the barbershop.

Barbershops were spaces in which my language skills provided access to their private realm of conversation but first I usually had to subject myself to being exoticized by giving into requests to perform and “say someting like yu de ah yard.” 4 After complying with requests, the replies from the men were always the same, “YO! She chop it and drop it like a REAL yardie!” 5 as participants exclaimed to people around them. After hearing their exclamations, I knew I was in. My chopping and dropping of the English language into authentic Jamaican patois meant

4 Say something like you’re in Jamaica
5 Yardie refers to someone from Jamaica
several things, namely that I could converse and engage white society in articulate English, means that I have the ability to obtain things, write letters or engage in correspondences with white people on their behalf or in situations that both female and male participants might otherwise feel intimidated. My ability to code-switch meant that I possess the ability to navigate between Black and non-Black spaces with a level of comfortability that most newly arrived immigrants do not have. Code-switching also meant that I had mastered the language to gain access as researcher and observer to private spaces because I verified that I belonged to the Caribbean nation, but it had its limitations. The fact of my Jamaican parentage and that I had not been back to Jamaica since I was a child always lingered in the backs of people’s minds, particularly when discussing certain regions in Jamaica or particular foods. Some foods I was very familiar with like blue draws, or run-down but my unfamiliarity with other dishes because I didn’t “grow in country” (meaning that I wasn’t raised in a rural parish in Jamaica), set me apart.

There was fellowship in being of Caribbean parentage but the ties were always jostled by some participants reminding me, “Oh I forget yu nuh born a yard, so yu wudn know bout dat” a statement that was always followed by a question: “whey yu say yu people come from again?” The comments by participants “reminding” me that I was born in the United States served as an important distinction for both participant and researcher. I was not an immigrant, and did not know their struggle to come all dis way to the United States. By setting us apart, Jamaican

6 Blue draws is a Caribbean dish made from ground provisions, cornmeal and raising mixed together and wrapped in a banana leaf and then steamed. The name blue draws refers to a type of yam that had a blueish texture once boiled. Versions of blue draws can be found in virtually every Caribbean and Latin American nation, as it was a hearty and filling meal for slaves and is easily transportable and can be eaten cold. Run-down is a Jamaican dish of stewed mackerel cooked in coconut milk.

7 Oh I forget you weren’t born in Jamaica, so you wouldn’t know about that
participants were specifically elucidating a simultaneous belonging and un-belonging. This notion of belonging and un-belonging occurred in multiple contexts during data analysis: 1) I recognized that participants’ reminders of where I was born was an attempt to separate me as a researcher from them in order to demonstrate that although I was of Jamaican parentage I was not born in Jamaica so therefore I could not claim an ‘authentic’ Jamaican identity. I belonged because of my ability to speak patois and my knowledge of Jamaican culture but I didn’t belong because of my birthplace. 2) This distinction by participants reflected how the participants engaged U.S. society: they were citizens of their respective Caribbean nations, and if they were undocumented, they technically did not belong in the U.S. and had no right to claim space here even though as Afro-Caribbeans they are quite present in terms of their contributions to society including their contributions to the labor sector. Ultimately, the Afro-Caribbean participants may have created a new home in New York, but New York was not home—the Caribbean. 3) As Afro-Caribbeans they may feel that they belong in the Caribbean spaces in their New York communities but if they were undocumented, their immigration status is symbolic of a sense of precarity because they can easily be deported. 4) The ability or inability to return home to the Caribbean is symbolic of belonging and un-belonging. Once an individual leaves the geographic area of the Caribbean and live in the United States for a significant period of time they may call the Caribbean home but due to acculturation and life circumstances some of the participants felt that they could never live in the Caribbean again because they no longer belonged there.

The irony is the very harsh nature of racism in U.S. society, Afro-Caribbean participants felt as though they did not belong in U.S. society because of negative racialized experiences but they remain committed to staying here even though the structural and institutional racist confines of U.S. society some participants embodied a sense of un-belonging by their mere presence in
U.S. This dynamic created a sense of limbo in which one lives in one space in the Caribbean diaspora (New York) and feels emotionally and culturally attached to the Caribbean nation of origin, but cannot truly claim they belong to either, especially the Caribbean nation. This blurring of the lines of belonging and un-belonging to the Caribbean nation was reflective of the multiple complexities of Caribbean diasporic identities, a true embodiment of the complexities of the participants themselves. This discussion of belonging and un-belonging presents itself throughout the dissertation and is also addressed in the first chapter in relation to diaspora.

On the Meaning of Value: Finding Value in Being

Shelley Colen in her work on West Indian housekeepers in the 1980s, discerned that in their capacity as domestics they are responsible for the “reproductive tasks of the employing household…and are also heir to a system of household work in the US which both reflects and reinforces a set of hierarchical relations in which they and their work are devalued.”8 The domestic work scholarship over the past 30 years focuses primarily on the conditional aspects of domestic work. These conditional aspects often contribute to a monolithic archetype of domestic workers in which they are mostly portrayed as oppressed workers, with the literature rarely emphasizing the complex identities domestics occupy and perform outside and within the context of work. This preoccupation with the conditional aspects of work, ultimately leads into the same pedantic discussions of the value employers place on workers but not the value that domestics hold for themselves. Unfortunately the oppressed worker archetype gets recycled and used by

community organizations, activists, and unions in their efforts to mobilize service workers, but also in grassroots efforts to mobilize employers.

While it is widely known and acknowledged that service work is undervalued in the United States, scholarly emphasis on job titles like “domestic” connotes a lower class and status value than the class and status values that women actually ascribe to and would label themselves with. Emphasis on what someone “does” for a living is not more of a defining characteristic, than who they are. Based on my research this phenomenon has less to do with the job titles themselves but the value or status placed by Caribbean societies on the people who perform the labor. Cultural heritage and growing up in Caribbean countries with Black majorities are significant factors which inform the Caribbean immigrant experience in the United States, and the relationship between Afro-Caribbeans to the Caribbean nation is intrinsic to how Afro-Caribbeans see themselves within and outside the Caribbean diaspora, and how they live, experience, value, and place themselves in the world. The multiple identities that Afro-Caribbean women occupy, embody and hence perform, speak to their ability to always see the value in countries they come from, and their place in those societies as women, mothers, daughters, sisters, partners, citizens, community members, church members, and workers.

The work identity is listed last, because like in the Caribbean, as it is in the United States, work only comprises one facet of their lives, the value attributed to all of their vast identities is what allows Afro-Caribbean women to see themselves in high regard, even when they are treated poorly. It is the ability to step away and leave a position without a moment’s notice to stick it to bad employers and feel no qualms about it, because these women come from countries that fought for their independence from colonial powers. The difference is the value those Caribbean societies place on being Caribbean, and the value that is placed on the contributions of those
workers to all segments of society. My research has revealed that the low value that United States’ society places on the labor performed by people in the service sector engenders a level of resentment and discontent among workers. The general sentiment among participants is that the very nature and structure of U.S. society is one that is indifferent to the condition of its workers, and the service sector labor force can do little to change it. With national initiatives against collective bargaining and consistent de-unionization during the last thirty years, I would agree with them.

During the course of my research I found that the issue of value is important, but not solely in the value employers place on Afro-Caribbean women performing service work, but the issue of value is intrinsic to how the women view themselves. The value that is attached to Afro-Caribbean women’s identity allows them to reach across Caribbean spaces pulling to them the identities that facilitate survival, but more importantly they carry with them the identities of self-fulfillment which are needed in the midst of uncertainty, especially for the women who are undocumented and living and working in New York. These values that are cultivated in Caribbean pasts engender the means of survival but also the means of living humanely and setting boundaries so that who they are as women, is never and can never be reduced to the limited category of worker. These values determine the means and methods some Afro-Caribbean women utilize to get straight or obtain their green cards with some women choosing to have family members file for them, while others with limited options choose to marry for their papers and get entangled in dangerous and violent situations that are more precarious than if they remained undocumented and unmarried.
Literature Review

Returning to Colen’s analysis of the devaluation of domestics, one finds that this issue extends beyond the spaces where domestic work is performed, but also extends to the service sector realm and to debates around the space, place and mobility of workers. Problematizing this devaluation in relation to modern debates surrounding immigration and the rights of citizenship, domestics and other service sector workers despite their contributions both inside and outside of the occupational sphere are noticeably absent from these discussions. In public and private spaces within the NY metropolitan area, both local and urban residents often extol the virtues of homogeneity and exclusivity without acknowledging the women who care for their children and live and work in their homes as members of that community.9

From the exclusionary initiatives towards ‘Mexican’ day laborers on Long Island and in various towns in Westchester to the xenophobic immigration policies in Europe towards migrant workers and now refugees, these racialized migration discourses epitomize the conundrum of visibility, in that workers become visible only in the performance or solicitation of work, but become invisible once services are rendered—hence they are no longer valuable. Afro-Caribbean women, like other immigrant groups become silent contributors to the formal economy not only in their positions in the service sector in providing childcare, elder care, the maintenance of households and nursing homes but also in their roles as consumers in the local ‘homogenous’ places in which they work and the ‘overtly diverse’ spaces that they live. This

9 This phenomenon is not specific to cities with diverse populations but is often replicated globally and in many areas across the U.S.
negative representation of immigrants is indicative of the multidimensionality of identities that are constituted within and outside of state policies, which supports James Clifford’s view of a diasporic consciousness that is “constituted both negatively and positively. It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion.”¹⁰ The current anti-immigration initiatives are a far cry from the series of 1990s Immigration and Naturalization policies which under better economic conditions actually promoted migration to the U.S. in an effort to attract entrepreneurs further increased class distinctions among migrants.¹¹ The anti-immigration rhetoric today constitutes an externally ascribed identity of immigrants that is solely negative and exclusionary, leaving little space for the representation of the complex identities embodied in both historical and present-day migrant experiences.

In the existing literature on domestics, scholars discuss the myriad of ways that women who perform household and childcare duties are racialized particularly in domestic-employer interactions.¹² According to various scholars racialization may occur while encountering racial/ethnic hierarchies during the hiring process, or in the daily experiences of performing domestic work inside the private spheres of employers’ homes. Most scholars concur that at some point in some capacity or another, domestics are racialized.¹³ Some of the main challenges I’ve encountered with this vast and rich literature surrounding domestics is that it engages

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racialization but not necessarily race itself; thus we have no idea how a racialized identity is produced. Neither do we get an intimate understanding of how that racialization makes one feel, and we also don’t explore the ways women who perform domestic work racialize themselves in order to obtain work and racialize other domestics from other countries. Furthermore, the internal engagements that Afro-Caribbean men and women have with themselves as they adjust to new racialized realities in a space where their diasporic Blackness takes on new meaning as they struggle to connect and engage with the self is an aspect that needs further exploration. Compounded with this reality is that when one examines the experiences and challenges of female migrants who work and contextualizes their valuable contributions with discourses surrounding transnationalism, these experiences are often reduced to an issue of moving between places and occupying different spaces. Many scholars are very insistent that the crossing of borders is intrinsic to the racialized experiences of migrant workers, providing an oversimplified explanation to circumstances and conditions that are not only constantly changing but are also very complex.14

When exploring intersectional approaches to transnationalism in relationship to complex global economic shifts, scholars such as Portes and Bach, and Saskia Sassen (to a certain extent) discuss racism, classism, and gender biases as dynamic yet static one dimensional processes.15 This one dimensional framework is predicated on a claim which presupposes that because women are at the bottom of global hierarchies they are forced into the global economy—hence they move across transnational spaces, always moving from the periphery to the core. The

15 Portes and Bach Saskia Sassen
underlying assumption is that it isn’t until these women cross the border from home to host country that racialization occurs. This methodology takes for granted that mobility and the rights and access to movement are the primary factors in instigating these intersectional discriminatory practices that women face; while also failing to take into account the existence of figures who are immobile in the physical sense but whose identities are continuously transcending local/global borders.

‘Transnationalism from Below’ tries to remedy this imbalanced perspective on the discriminatory experiences of migrant workers by taking an activist stance. Unfortunately, even this alternative approach to traditional transnationalist practices ends up replicating the latter’s inability to truly identify their subjects/informants outside of narrowly defined social and class terms usually linked to their status as workers. Despite the efforts of many engaging ‘transnationalism from below’; absent within these discourses are the people themselves. Their experiences/positions as migrant workers who have fallen prey to increasing globalization is situated within mobilization efforts by activists and scholars who only see and identify these workers as oppressed subjects and nothing else.\footnote{Luis Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith. "The locations of transnationalism." \textit{Transnationalism from below} 6 (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998) 3-34.} While the vast majority of literature on domestic work both uses and privileges transnationalism as a lens through which domestic work is explored, there are clearly some limitations in how some scholars engage gendered labor within the context of migration. This project will also attempt to situate immigrants within broader and more intricate contexts by highlighting their past lives in the Caribbean and the contributions to their communities; calling attention to the realities and complexities of gendered Caribbean diasporic experiences; and the maintenance of familial relationships, kinship ties,
cultural values, and employment networks. Many scholars have been able to hone in on the challenges that migrant families face as they try to negotiate a careful balance between the difficulties surrounding assimilation and the retention of culture and cultural traditions but their work lacks a level of intimacy and accessibility to the private realms of Afro-Caribbean women’s lives.

My research contributes to existing scholarship that supports the notion that migrant workers are racialized prior, during, and post migration. This emphasis on racialization as a continual process is best demonstrated through Stuart Hall’s discussion of identity as a production that is always constituted within representation and not outside of it. Nadia Kim’s scholarship further buttresses these continual processes in her exploration into the navigation of imperial citizenship, race, culture, and identity among Koreans living in Los Angeles. Kim aptly demonstrates that racialization is a process that Koreans, like many groups never escape but must learn over time to negotiate in the formulation of their own global/local identities as immigrants living in the United States. The challenges that domestics encounter reveals the


This speaks to a broader and complex issue of the lived experience and negotiation of identities that occurs among immigrants and migrant workers when they live in spaces and don’t feel like they belong. Jacqueline Nassy Brown, in her work on Caribbean immigrants in Liverpool does an excellent job of problematizing the negotiation of identities by exploring how that negotiation plays out in people’s daily lives and in immigrants’ interactions and relationships with local residents.\footnote{Jacqueline Nassy Brown,} \textit{Dropping Anchor, Setting Sail: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool}. Finally, this research examines the trials of becoming documented, and engages domestic abuse not as a brief mention, but provides an intimate portrait of the negotiations that women make with themselves and with others in order to get their papers. In this regard, this project steps outside of just looking at domestic abuse via specific immigrant groups but moves the discourse of the politics of migration forward to the politics of being, and the sacrifices that future they cannot yet see, but are diligently working towards.
Ethnographer’s Reflection: Entering the Field

As I climbed onto the #31 bus one day after physical therapy, I walked onto the bus and stood before this older woman. She looked to be in her late 50s perhaps older. By the texture of her skin, she could pass for late 40s but her brown amber-highlighted wig revealed that she was in fact, older. I thought, “Only a big ooman would wear a wig like that.”23 I held onto the handle of her bus seat and noticed she was looking at me with a pensive stare. I contemplated asking if she was lost, the way her eyes kept searching my face. I wondered if she had known my father because on rare occasions I would run into an older Jamaican who would ask me if my name was Pinnock since I’ve been told I bear a great resemblance to my father, even though at the time I was on the bus, he’d been dead almost twenty years. I thought, “Naw! She’s not old enough to have known him, she’s just lost or maybe I resemble someone else she knows.”

The woman opened her mouth to speak, paused, and then said nothing. Then she asked me if Allerton Avenue was where she needed to take the #26 bus. I told her it was only a few stops away and that I would let her know when to get off. She then replied, “I not getting off, I only want to know is where.” I said “Ok” and then told her she needed to cross the street to catch the bus. The woman thanked me and after another pregnant pause she asked: “Excuse me, you know of any work?” Knowing full well what she meant, but not wanting to make any assumptions I pressed her for clarity anyway and asked, “What kind of work?” The woman said: “You know, WORK? Mi already have a job but mi work all the way in Connecticut and the

23 This observation was made on the wig style which is typically only worn by older Afro-Caribbean women in the area.
pay is good but di expense. [I earn] $23 dollars fi one day, sometimes if mi work late the busses stop run up dere and I have to take a taxi to Metro North. Then fi di day mi spend $41.00.” I asked: “Bwoy! Nuh whole heap ah money dat? How yu manage?” She said “Mi get by because mi nuh pay nuh big rent but mi wan sumting closer, weh mi nuh haffi travel so far. Yu work at di hospital?”. She was referring to Jacobi Hospital located across the street from where I got on the bus. I thought to myself, “Great. I’ve spent so much time at that damn ghetto clinic before I got insurance that my oppression as a poor grad student just follows me. Damn!” I looked down at my two bags and then thought, “Well, I was coming from school before therapy, I guess it’s plausible.” I then replied, no. The woman asked if I “take the bus all the while” and I told her sometimes. I told her that I had come from downtown. She said, “Ok?!” as if she were quizzically surprised.

I got off the bus somewhere along Eastchester Road and prepared for the long walk home. I wished her luck but knew I couldn’t ask my relatives or family friends for work for this woman. I didn’t know this woman from nowhere, and suppose I recommended her and she gives someone I know bad name? I heard my aunts’ voices in my head: “Yu don’t know people and is not any and everyone you can recommend!” So I disembarked without taking her name or number or giving her my business card. As I walked away from the bus stop four things came to

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24 Boy! Isn’t that a lot of money? How do you manage? She said: I get by because I my rent isn’t high, but I want something closer, where I don’t have to travel so far.
25 Susan Lone Smith, in Lone Pursuit, provides an excellent discussion about the challenges that job seekers have in trying to obtain work. According to Smith, job holders are very reluctant to give referrals to job seekers because job holders are fearful that their reputation may be ruined if the job seeker is hired based on the job holder’s referral and the job seeker either fails to meet expectations or doesn’t take the position seriously, thereby ruining the job holder’s reputation. Sandra Susan Smith, Lone Pursuit: Distrust and Defensive Individualism among the Black Poor. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007); Chapter One, uses Weber’s approach to class, status, party to analyze class and status dynamics among participants, and participants and their spouses.
mind: 1. Christine you should’ve taken that woman’s number. You missed out on an interview. Damn! 2. What kind of ways does she have that she has to ask strangers about work? She doesn’t even know me! 3. She thought I was a domestic worker! Girl, you gotta finish this PhD because this wearing your oppression is ridiculous! 4. She thought I was a domestic! Yay! Maybe doing fieldwork won’t be so hard after all. I had my first ethnographic encounter! How great is that? I couldn’t make this stuff up if I tried! I walked home feeling uplifted and depressed all at once, because the reality of the recent economic downturn hit me and I knew that that woman wouldn’t have asked me about work if she didn’t really need it. I sighed heavily. America is something else!

Methodology

The section is prefaced with an ethnographic reflection on the bus to elucidate the everyday encounters with Afro-Caribbean women in the Northeast Bronx that occurred during data collection from 2011-2014. I obtained most of the thirty participants through random encounters and then used snowballing to meet others. These encounters, though brief, demonstrate the sameness and familiarity among Caribbeans across the diaspora, but also the complexity of women’s lives. Although the woman on the bus was clearly in need of better employment, she wouldn’t have spoken to me if as we say in the Caribbean “her spirit didn’t take me”. It is the intuitive way that women from African diasporic cultures read others to immediately ascertain whether they want to engage the other person. The woman on the bus felt a level of familiarity with me which is why she felt safe enough to reveal so much to me about her circumstances in such a short bus ride. I do not know how long she had been here, but for
the mere fact she felt comfortable enough to ask for work, I recognized that as an ethnographer, I made her feel like she belonged. For a woman who was clearly undocumented, I would learn during the rest of my data collection that ‘finding a work’ takes on new meanings for Afro-Caribbean women as they struggle to become documented.

The two ethnographic reflections in the beginning of this chapter epitomize the different ways that female Afro-Caribbean service workers must find a new way of being, especially if they are undocumented. The reflections also indicate the different masks that Afro-Caribbean women put on in order to perform domestic work. My grandmother’s drab work attire was in stark contrast to the clothes she normally wore in her everyday life. The attire worn during her personal time did not reflect her class position in the United States, but it reflected her upper middle class position in Jamaica. Similarly, the Afro-Caribbean woman being yelled at by her employer’s small child was most likely incongruent to what she tolerated from her own children or children in her family, but for survival that woman, like my grandmother put up with a lot. In the quest for documentation and in the multi-faceted experiences of Afro-Caribbeans grappling with race, class, gender, and labor, the concept of belonging changed as well, for me as an ethnographer and for my participants in their daily lives. During the course of my fieldwork, I didn’t always feel like I belonged despite my accessibility to the Jamaican and Caribbean nation. This had to do with how I was positioned and identified in public and private spaces, and the many ways I was perceived.

The challenges of collecting data in these constantly shifting public and private spaces meant that I had to situate myself as a researcher in a way that allowed for easier accessibility to the private realms of the these Afro-Caribbean women. Utilizing participant observation in places like churches provided a level of accessibility that being in public spaces like parks did
not. In public spaces, I had to rely on observation when I finally did get access, and gaining entrance into the intimate spaces took time and required me to be scrutinized before I could gain access. That accessibility was usually facilitated through our common identification with the nation; be it the Caribbean nation, the Jamaican nation, or the diasporic realm of Afro-Caribbean women living in the United States. However, my accessibility changed during the course of data collection because I changed during that time, and in turn, this research project transformed too. Initially, my accessibility was quite easy because I wore normal clothing and people had no idea of what my spiritual practices were. Prior to fieldwork, I was a spiritualist, healer, and a Yoruba practitioner. At one point, what gave me authenticity through our mutual commonalities with the Caribbean nation was no longer sufficient for my accessibility because the changes in my spiritual development required me to wear white from head to toe, and wear eleykes (beaded spiritual necklaces representative of the Yoruba deities and IFA). With the changes in my attire I was simultaneously acknowledged and rejected by some women based on assumptions about me being an obeah worker or someone who practices witchcraft. The same faces that greeted me when I wore blues jeans looked at me as if I was a dangerous specimen under scrutiny when I wore all white.

One of my most embarrassing and painful experiences during fieldwork occurred along Lexington Avenue. As an adjunct instructor at Hunter College who taught early morning classes twice a week, I would routinely walk from 86th Street to 68th Street venturing a few blocks north, south, east and west of this twenty-two block stretch to observe domestics of color dropping off children to school in the mornings. After my morning classes and office hours, I

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26 IFA refers to the Nigerian practice of the African religious tradition commonly known as Santeria or Lucumi in the Brazilian, Cuban and African American practice of the Yoruba religion in the Western hemisphere.
would stay behind at work to walk this same route in the afternoons to observe domestics picking children up from school: The Buckley School, The Hewitt School, Dalton and the smattering of elite private schools which sprinkle the Upper East Side of Manhattan. These women of color ranging from Latinas, to Filipinas, to Afro-Caribbeans would pick up their employer’s children and stop by local eateries and bakeries, and gourmet food markets to give children a treat before taking them home, or to grab a quick bite before or after the children’s afterschool activities.

One cold fall morning, I was in my usual all white attire but decided to dress up and wear white dress slacks to teach in that day. As I left the 86th Street train station, I walked along Lexington Avenue headed down to Hunter College. The sidewalks were not crowded and pedestrians walked past me with ease. It had been raining earlier in the morning and I periodically glanced downward to avoid stepping in any puddles and soiling my white slacks. As I lifted my head back up, I felt someone’s gaze upon me. I saw a brown-skinned Black woman pushing a plastic covered double stroller with a set to twin babies inside. The baby carriage looked heavy and cumbersome and seemed like an expensive purchase made by someone who didn’t have to push it on a daily basis. I noticed the woman was staring at me intently as I took my time walking down the block towards her. As I walked closer to her, I noticed she had a panicked look in her eyes, and as she was about to pass me, she hurriedly maneuvered the stroller with the children inside into the street and into oncoming traffic, yelling at me that I was an “Iniquity Worker!” and “Not today ah raass!” I abruptly stopped walking and looked at her in disbelief and whispered “But see ya?” as drivers honked their horns and slowed to avoid hitting her and the children. She kept on looking back on me and then maneuvered the heavy double stroller back onto the sidewalk. In my shock and embarrassment, I laughed out
loud, and then kept on walking thinking how ridiculous she was to put people’s children into oncoming traffic to avoid touching me on the sidewalk.

As I continued walking to Hunter in utter amazement of the incredulous scene that just occurred, I was slightly amused, but also sad. It was the first, but it would not be the last time I would realize that my interactions with domestics wouldn’t always be easy. My spiritual path was indeed incongruous with trying to obtain participants, and depending on where these women came from, I had more antagonistic encounters, and trying to get participants during fall and winter months became impossible. Finally, I decided to broaden my criteria and changed my data collection for nannies in particular, during the spring and summer months, and expanded my sample of service workers to include healthcare workers.

This doctoral project initially began with studying domestics who lived in the Northeast Bronx and Lower Westchester and worked in Manhattan, Connecticut, and Lower and Upper Westchester. As a lifelong Bronx native, and then a doctoral candidate without funding for fieldwork, I had to modify my project from one of studying Afro-Caribbean domestic workers to one of feasibility and pragmatism. With high gas prices, I could not afford gas to drive around and with limited funds, could not afford to take Bee Line buses throughout Lower Westchester to visit and observe domestics in the towns of Eastchester, Bronxville, White Plains, and Scarsdale as initially planned. I also suffer from motion sickness, so aside from the expense, riding the Metro North or taking the bus to these locations was not feasible.\(^{27}\) To offset my finances, I walked 18-22 blocks of Lexington Avenue on the mornings I taught, and would visit

\(^{27}\) I also quickly realized the impracticality of trying to solicit participants on their way to or from work. For many women, the long commute is one of a few or only opportunity to catch up on much needed rest. I could not impose on these women’s time with interviews and questions during what may have been the only moments to themselves, to think, or to just be.
playgrounds and parks in the afternoons. For over two and half years, from late spring through early fall I regularly visited Sutton Place Park, Madison Square Park, Central Park, Prospect Park in Brooklyn, Union Square Park, and a school playground on 68th Street. I also observed women working as domestics in the Barnes and Nobles bookstore in Union Square, and many cafes, bakeries, on the Upper East Side, in Midtown and Cobble Hill.

Recognizing the limitations of only collecting data during warm months, and facing so many obstacles during winter trying to speak with women who perform domestic work, I decided to expand my criteria, and interview and observe food service workers, retail workers, and healthcare workers, (Certified Nurse’s Aides, home health aides, companions, and support staff for the mentally disabled and elderly populations). It was easier for me to get participants by entering the spaces that I belonged and where my white attire might or might not be frowned upon. My actions of buying groceries as an Afro-Caribbean woman would not be scrutinized. Utilizing my Jamaicanness to my advantage I became immersed in the lived spaces that Afro-Caribbean people occupied. It also provided me with the opportunity to learn more about the Northeast Bronx than I had in my entire life.

My methodology comprised of entering spaces as an Afro-Caribbean woman and people observing me and my mannerisms thereby determining my entrance into the nation. I could enter spaces because I belonged to the Caribbean community living here in New York, because I, like them, was a member of the Caribbean diaspora, a member of the nation. My ability as a researcher to allow myself to be read and vetted was something I was keenly aware was part of the process. Allowing Afro-Caribbean people to read me and read my Jamaicanness gave me access. This access was granted due to my ability and willingness to be immersed in the lived spaces that Afro-Caribbeans occupied, and making sure that my immersion occurred on a regular
weekly and bi-weekly basis. This immersion involved going to the same green grocers each week, taking the train late at night with Afro-Caribbean women going in for their shifts working as certified nurses’ aides at the one of the six nursing homes and rehabilitation centers located within a 2-mile radius in the Northeast Bronx. When I walked home from the train late at night, I listened to the conversations of women who walked in pairs or small groups to the nursing homes in the area. When I left for work in the afternoons, I overheard conversations of women who worked the day shift, and were rushing to class or to pick up kids from school, and too often rushing to their second or third job at another nursing home in the area or a short train ride away. My Caribbeanness allowed Afro-Caribbean women, in particular to have long discussions in patois about their working conditions and personal lives in front of me, because they felt comfortable speaking around me. If I were a white woman or man, I know that those conversations wouldn’t have occurred, because the mere presence of white bodies means that as Afro-Caribbeans, as Black people, their spaces cannot be intimate, or safe.

Listening to these conversations at various times of the day and night, one learned how many beds these Afro-Caribbean, African, and Latinas had to make, how many patients they had, how understaffed and overworked they were. I learned of racialized hierarchies in the healthcare facilities, with almost all of the senior medical and administrative staff being white, and the lower level service workers being women of color. I heard about the conflicts between workers from day shifts and those who worked at night and the doctors and nurses who managed with compassion, and those who did not. I also learned what plans they had for the future, or the past working situations they were happy to leave behind. The ethnicity of these women, most of whom were Afro-Caribbean from the English-speaking Caribbean at the beginning of my data collection, changed to African, African-American, Afro-Caribbean from the French-speaking
Caribbean, Filipina, Latina, South Asian, and a few white women by the time my data collection ended. During the write-up phase of the dissertation, the demographics not only changed by ethnicity and race, it also changed by age, with the women working in the nursing homes being considerably younger than when I first started conducting research. This fascinating phenomenon will be the foundation for my future research.

Finally, my data collection occurred in participants’ homes, on the subway and on buses, in public parks, bookstores, restaurants, and local businesses where Afro-Caribbean women work and patronize and in spaces Afro-Caribbean women refer to as their spiritual homes—churches. I regularly volunteered and participated in church activities in three churches in the Northeast Bronx. My participation involved contributing and volunteering at concerts, church bake sales, banquets, picnics, barbecues, and harvest suppers. These valuable experiences allowed me to cultivate relationships with participants as a result of chance meetings in the bathroom, in the kitchen, or by giving participants a ride home from events. It was in these three different churches, that I became privy to another layer of intimacy among women, and also received so much love, support, respect, and acceptance for my spiritual practices. These women of all age groups, but mostly in their 50s and 60s had so much respect for my research and the monumental task of getting a Phd; and I was in awe and had great respect for these women, documented and undocumented who earned very little, but gave so much of their time, efforts, prayers and positive energies to people in need in the community.

28 In future iterations of this project it will be useful to theorize the spaces that Afro-Caribbean women occupy and analyze those spaces in relationship to the oral histories and personal narratives that are told in those spaces as sites of production. Cultural Anthropologist John Collins provides a critical analysis of heritage sites in Brazil and the personal stories that are told by marginalized residents who live in Pelourinho and explores the intricacies of how history is produced. This text is an excellent resource to examine marginalized populations and the production of oral histories in relationship to the state. John Collins, Revolt of the Saints: Memory and Redemption in the Twilight of Brazilian Racial Democracy. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
Chapter Outline

Chapter One: How Dem Reach? Afro-Caribbeans and Caribbean Spaces in the Northeast Bronx provides an historical background to Caribbean migration to New York during the 20th century and provides a spatial analysis of the neighborhoods that Afro-Caribbeans live in the Northeast Bronx. Chapter Two: All Dis Way: Afro Caribbean Women’s Narratives of Migration Across the Caribbean Diaspora explores the migration stories of some of the Afro-Caribbean participants who migrated to the United States over the course of a 40-year period, from 1961-2008. This chapter includes reflections on the lives they had in the English-speaking Caribbean to their introduction to New York and the transition to finding work as new immigrants. In this section I explore the challenges to migration, and the difficult choices some women make in order to stay in this country in addition to grappling with the sacrifices they made just to come here. Chapter Two: Inescapable Racism: An Introduction to the Entanglements of Race, Diasporic Blackness, and Gendered Identities engages race and racism through a diasporic lens, elucidating the reality that Afro-Caribbeans occupy multiple forms of diasporic Blackness that are intimately tied to the Caribbean nation and those that are not. This chapter speaks to the complexity of Blackness and the multiple ways of being. While the Afro-Caribbean participants already occupy gendered identities, this chapter highlights the new ways of being and engaging U.S. society and the different ways that Afro-Caribbeans are racialized and Blackwashed on arrival, and the myriad ways they must negotiate and engage internal dialogues of Diasporic Blackness and external forces of racism. This chapter also addresses the different ways that Caribbean gender roles are deployed and performed in how Afro-Caribbeans parent their children to cope with the violence of police brutality and the criminalization of Black male youth. Chapter Three: Class Travels and Traveling to Class:
Exploring the Complexities of Identity and Survival Among Afro-Caribbeans in New York City problematizes the conundrum of class identities that traverse the Caribbean diaspora through migration, and the class identities that are appropriated and performed in order the elevate themselves in the social hierarchy. This chapter also deals with the many ways that Afro-Caribbeans try to elevate their class status and reveals the gendered differences and options available to Afro-Caribbean men and women in their quest to identify themselves and negotiate new identities. Chapter Four: Afro-Caribbean Women Laboring in New York: A Means to An End discusses the challenges of healthcare workers seeing their patients and clients through to the end of their lives, and the trials of being an undocumented and documented healthcare worker. This chapter explores the challenges of mobilizing documented healthcare workers and domestics, and the obstacles and difficulties that women who are undocumented encounter performing in the healthcare industry and as domestics. Conclusion: Was it Worth It? Afro-Caribbean Women Looking and Moving Forward, provides a general analysis of the participant’s narratives and asks the women was it worth it to come all dis way. This dissertation is an attempt to shift the way we speak and theorize service sector workers, by moving them from the margins of invisibility to recognizing that through intimate portraits that these women and their labor are very much centered and present in this Caribbean diasporic space. Most of their narratives are in their own words in their own regional patois or dialect, and this work though very multifaceted and complex tries to provide a platform for them to articulate their experiences in the spaces of uncertainty reside. In that manner, it is my sincere intention that this project be read with an understanding that these women and their stories are here; and as readers and ethnographers we must continue to search beyond the confines of the walls of the workplace and see them in the full spaces they live in between.
More: A Poem29

I see you as so much more that how you’ve been defined,
Labeled throughout (his)tory and today
I see you more for who you are
Not what you do to make a living

I see you as a living, breathing
Powerful Force who has the capacity to
Occupy many places without leaving or having to live in only one
You are not what they need you to be—a surrogate
Mother, cleaner, constant caretaker or a worn out
Comforter that’s discarded after fulfilling its use because
You are who you are

I see you for the ideas, thoughts, and perceptions that you bring (carry)
And for the indelible marks (impressions)
That remain
Even when you are no longer
There

You are like a strong wind blowing
Across a garden
Unsure of your affect
Having been in your presence
if only for a moment
The world knows you were there

I will not remember you in photographs with pale white, blue-eyed babies in your arms
Or with buckets of filthy water at your feet
I won’t even remember you for the moments of preparing sustenance for others
Neither for the images of you smiling with employer

I will remember you for all the moments when you were not doing these things for strangers
I will remember that your lives encompassed so much
More
More

29 This poem was written after I attended a rally at Barnard College mobilizing for the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. I was thoroughly irritated by the archetype of oppression and slavery that was put forth, and that many of the Afro-Caribbean’s women’s testimonies were clearly not written in their own words.
More
More than work
That whether you worked for 24 hours with only a few hours to yourself
But not your own
Or whether you worked for 8, 10, 12, hours with only a few hours to yourself
That were not your own
You will be remembered for the many ways your lives were yours
Even when the activities of employment were so much
Your lives, your life was, is, and will be remembered not by the work you do
But the Lives, Life you lived
In spite of it.

10/24/08
Chapter One: How Dem Reach? Afro-Caribbeans and Caribbean Spaces in the Northeast Bronx

Caribbean Migration to the United States

Caribbean migration to the United States began in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century as a demand for labor grew with the growth of the banana industry and as a direct result of Caribbean migrants working on the Panama Canal.\textsuperscript{30} From 1899 to 1904, Caribbean migration to the U.S. was relatively 1000 immigrants per year and it increased by 3,000-7,000 immigrants every year after 1904 until the Great Depression. Aside from a decrease in Caribbean migration due to a dearth of employment opportunities following the Great Depression, the Immigration Act of 1924 also limited Caribbean migration to the United States.\textsuperscript{31} This legislation allowed immigrants from Eastern Europe to emigrate but denied immigrants from all Asian nations and placed quotas on immigrants in the Western hemisphere seeking to enter into the United States. Caribbean immigrants still entered the U.S. in smaller numbers by migrating first to England and then migrating to the United States. These quotas limited Caribbean migration considerably until World War II facilitated an increase in Caribbean migration through the U.S. government’s recruitment of Caribbean immigrants to supply labor in agricultural and non-defense industries.\textsuperscript{32}

Caribbean immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean primarily migrated to Florida, New

\textsuperscript{32} Palmer, Ibid, 8.
York City, and Chicago, since employment opportunities were more readily available in these states.

Sociologist John A. Arthur claims the vast majority of African and Caribbean immigrants who migrated to the U.S. at the turn of the 20th century were admitted to attend college with the hope that after receiving their college education they would return to home to better their native countries. Other studies also posit that the immigrants from the Caribbean who migrated to the United States were poor and in search of better economic opportunities. The significance of the shift in the socio-economic status of Caribbean immigrants admitted to the U.S. at the turn of the century who sought to escape poverty to the improved socio-economic circumstances at the end of the 20th century is an indication that while Caribbean economies vastly improved post-independence, that many of these nations continue to grapple with economic stability and the ability to reach the highest levels of the socio-economic hierarchy by the vast majority of Caribbean populations remains evasive or extremely limited. The shifting class status of Caribbeans migrating to the United States was mainly influenced by the change in immigration policy during the 1990s in which the United States actively recruited white collar professionals in an attempt to improve and diversify the U.S. workforce. This economic reality is the basis for understanding many of the female participants in this study, many of whom attained a comfortable middle-class status in their respective countries but found that despite their professional achievements they were still prevented from going further, and so becoming part of the elite would never be their reality.

The late sociologist Bryce-Laporte in his analysis of new immigrants to the United States noted that the male to female ratio of 2:3 maintained a female majority from 1952-1965 with 1,578,122 males being admitted and 1,916,432 females being admitted to the United States over a 13-year period. Furthermore, Bryce-Laporte also determined that between 1966-1978, 4,409,802 documented immigrants were admitted to the U.S. with 2,891,925 of those immigrants being women. With the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 otherwise known as the Hart-Cellar Act, the quota restrictions that were established with the immigration laws of the 1920s were eliminated. The implementation of the 1965 act allowed for an influx of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean with many women being admitted into the United States to perform service work, and specifically domestic work via employer sponsorship programs.

In the years following the 1965 legislation, the United States underwent many societal changes with the end of the Civil Rights Movement, the beginning of the Black Nationalist Movement, welfare reform, the Feminist Movement, and the Vietnam War. By the beginning of the 1970s, many cities were grappling with high unemployment among men due to veterans returning home to cities and towns floundering under de-industrialization. While the feminist movement enabled many white women to gain entry into the white-collar sector, women from Latin America and the Caribbean took on the social reproductive tasks of the household by tending to the children and households of middle class and upper middle class white women who were taking advantage of getting a college education and white collar job opportunities. African American women were able to find jobs in low-level entry positions in white collar industries,

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35 Ibid.
leaving domestic positions to be filled by Caribbean women migrating to New York and other major cities. Afro-Caribbean immigrants who migrated to New York moved into existing African American communities in New York City and were mostly concentrated in the boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens and The Bronx.

**The Northeast Bronx**

What is unique about this project is that it veers away from immigration scholarship that typically analyzes Afro-Caribbean immigrant experiences in what is considered the mecca of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in New York—Brooklyn, which holds the largest population of Afro-Caribbeans living outside of the Caribbean. Instead, this project examines Afro-Caribbean immigrant experiences in the Northeast Bronx. The Northeast Bronx is an area which is accessible via two major highways: I-95N-New England State Throughway, and I-87N The New York State Throughway and two parkways: The Bronx River Parkway which stretches from the South Bronx to Westchester, and the Hutchinson River Parkway which begins from The Bronx side of the Whitestone Bridge in the Throgs Neck and Pelham Bay areas to Connecticut where it changes into the Merritt Parkway. Without traffic one can be in New Jersey, Brooklyn, Manhattan or Queens in less than 30 minutes via car. Aside from ground transportation, this area of The Bronx appeals to many residents due to the multiple options for people who drive to work. The elevated subway lines of the 2 and 5 trains transport residents who work in the city every day from the border of Mount Vernon in the Northeast Bronx to the South Bronx before heading into Manhattan and Brooklyn. Riding these trains from beginning of the lines in the Northeast Bronx to the end in Flatbush Brooklyn is at least a two-hour subway ride.

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36 See Appendix A for maps of the Northeast Bronx area; neighborhoods in the Northeast Bronx; and a map of Westchester.
During the late 1960s, the Northeast Bronx saw rapid development with the development of multi-family residential homes nestled between huge lots of open land. Many of the multi-family homes were quickly bought up by many Caribbeans seeking to escape the South Bronx. Cooperative housing developments like Co-Op City and Mark Terrace prior to the late 1960s were almost exclusively Jewish and ethnic white, to the extent that it was extremely difficult for African Americans to join the cooperatives. By the late 1960s, the Jewish and ethnic white residents mimicked the white flight occurring in other cities in the metropolitan New York area, and these residents moved to Lower Westchester, Long Island, and Riverdale or they moved to neighborhoods in the Northeast Bronx that remained predominantly ethnic white like Pelham Parkway, Throgs Neck, and Pelham Bay Park to escape the influx of African Americans and Caribbeans leaving the South Bronx. According to a New York City Department of City Planning report which analyzed immigration to New York City during the 1980s, Jamaicans accounted for more than two-thirds of immigrants living in the Northeast Bronx with many preferring to live in areas with relatively few Hispanics such as the Wakefield, Edenwald, Eastchester and Baychester areas.37

As more Caribbeans moved to the Northeast Bronx, more development came, but for almost 30 years, until late 1980s, the Northeast Bronx appealed to many Caribbeans because of the price of homes and lower rent prices. The vast majority of Caribbeans were first time home buyers who learned of new development in the area via friends and family, with many family members buying homes within walking distance to each other. Back then, the Northeast Bronx appealed to Caribbean immigrants because of the ability to commute to Manhattan via subway in an hour and 15 minutes. Still, as the area began to get more developed by the 1990s, some

Caribbean residents opted to leave the Northeast Bronx and moved out to Long Island or into Lower Westchester, preferring a more suburban lifestyle, better schools, and to escape the rising crime rates. The area’s low crime rates seemed non-existent in the 1960s but by the 1980s had seen many young Afro-Caribbean men incarcerated. While this section of the Northeast Bronx is home to many multi-generational Afro-Caribbean immigrants from the U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua, Dominica, Guyana, Belize, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Barbados, it is commonly referred to as “Likkle Jamaica” due to the high population of Jamaican immigrants living in the area, and the abundance of restaurants serving Jamaican cuisine. Currently, the area is changing with more Africans, South Asians, and Eastern Europeans moving into the area in search of lower rents and more affordable housing.

The Northeast Bronx is a mixed residential and commercial area mainly comprised of over 14,000, two-three story semi-detached brick multi-family residential homes and 1-family homes made of either brick or wood. There are also a few public housing projects nestled off of main thoroughfares like Baychester Avenue, Boston Road, and East Gunhill Road. The Bronx is home to over 1.3 million residents over 42 square miles. This part of The Bronx primarily served by Community District Council 12 and a small portion of Community District 10 refers to the areas of Baychester, Eastchester, Edenwald, Co-Op city, Seton Falls, Wakefield, and Williamsbridge and is serviced by many buses and the 5 train to Eastchester-Dyre and the 2 train to E. 241st or Nereid. According to 2010 census records this area of the Northeast Bronx is home to approximately 160,000 residents, 50,000 of those residents are West Indian, but census

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[39] Ibid.
residential homes are primarily located on side streets with commercial businesses situated on busy main thoroughfares like Boston Post Road (Boston Road), White Plains Road and East Gunhill Road. The area is peppered with a plethora of Caribbean restaurants, auto mechanic shops, green groceries, barbershops, pizza shops, fast food restaurants and bodegas. The area has two large parks: Haffen Park,\(^{41}\) which is over 9 acres located in an area called The Valley is surrounded by a nursing home and single and 1-2 family homes in the Baychester area; and Seton Falls Park “a woodland, wetland, and bird sanctuary” that is over 35 acres of land, surrounded by residential homes, Edenwald Projects, and three schools (elementary, junior high school and a catholic high school) is located in the Edenwald/Seton Falls area.\(^{42}\)

There are plenty of trees on residential blocks to give this area a unique natural, neighborhood feel. If one is standing on a tree-lined street filled with multi-family brick dwellings along with small bungalows, the sight of homes with large backyards creates a mix of a suburban aesthetic in an urban environment. This unique suburban feel to the Northeast Bronx, particularly on blocks with older homes that have larger yards, or even older homes with smaller yards with green space, one is conscious that they’re not in “the city”, which is how most residents refer to Manhattan, and describe it as a “dirty, congested place with lots of tall buildings little green space, that is a place for work, not home”. The city is a place that one only

\(^{40}\) When asked if they filled out census surveys, the undocumented participants in this study when told me they routinely refused to fill out census data and also refused to answer questions when census workers visited their homes. The reality of not being counted is a serious and complex issue that comes up in a later discussion on immigration reform. In one regard, the participants need to be as inconspicuous as possible even though their labor both supports and sustains the formal economy, but the reality of not being counted has significant consequences particularly when it comes to being excluded from healthcare reform and being unacknowledged in national discourses on immigration reform.

\(^{41}\) [http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/haffen-park](http://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/haffen-park) [Accessed March 19, 2016]

goes to if they have to go to, and especially for female undocumented Afro-Caribbean workers who had property in the Caribbean, many jump at the prospect of working in the suburbs away from the congestion, and their commutes to those suburbs become opportunities to rest and contemplate life as they travel from homes away from home in the Northeast Bronx to work in other people’s homes in Upper and Lower Westchester and Connecticut. It is not uncommon for documented and undocumented Caribbean residents to not venture into Manhattan at all, with many residents preferring to travel to the Cross County Mall located in Yonkers, via car or bus to shop for clothes, or to travel to Fordham Road to get bargains on clothing. Prior to the recent indoor shopping mall which opened in 2014 in Co-City called the Mall at Bay Plaza, most residents who didn’t work in the city preferred to go to Fordham Road or Cross County than travel into the city.

Depending on where one is located on Boston Road, White Plains Road, East 233rd Street, Dyre Avenue, or Baychester Avenue, one is either a block away or just a 10-minute walk into the Lower Westchester suburbs of Mount Vernon or Pelham, and no more than a 5-10-minute drive to New Rochelle and Yonkers or a 30-40-minute drive to Upper Westchester. The close proximity of this Northeast Bronx community to Lower and Upper Westchester has its advantages for female Afro-Caribbean residents who work as service workers. If these women have driver’s licenses, they have more employment options available to them, especially if they are undocumented. They do not have to venture into New York City in search of work, but can easily obtain jobs as domestics working as nannies or housecleaners, or can work as companions and home health aides to care for the parents and children upper-middle class and elite white families in Westchester. These women can navigate these suburban Westchester spaces virtually

43 See Appendix A for a map of Westchester
unnoticed during the day or night. Driving by bus stops in Lower and Upper Westchester, one can often spot Caribbean women who perform live-in or days work by the amount of women waiting to get on or off buses in the evenings or on weekends. Depending on the grocery stores in Westchester, one can usually spot live-in domestics or companions rushing around the supermarket with long lists doing grocery shopping for their employers in the mornings, during the day before school is dismissed or before the evening rush. Women who can drive usually hop into their employer’s car or if they can’t drive have taxis waiting for them outside of the supermarket.

Being able to drive may require that some tasks take longer at work, such as dropping children off at different schools and taking them to different afterschool activities, but if domestics can’t drive they must make similar adjustments to get to work. For Afro-Caribbean women who perform service work in Westchester but live in the Northeast Bronx and don’t drive, their commute to work may entail a series of long bus rides or short taxi rides to take the MetroNorth to get to work. These commuter trains that travel throughout Westchester and Connecticut facilitate travel across borders moving Afro-Caribbean women from areas designated as urban to suburban, crossing through several municipalities per day just to earn a living. In many regards these women have traveled from the Caribbean only to keep on traveling to earn a living when they arrive.
Understanding the Caribbean diaspora and Diasporic Blackness for Afro-Caribbean Women

“Diaspora is simultaneously a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning, a navigation of multiple belongings, of networks of affiliation.”

-Paul Tiyambe Zeleza,

“Diaspora Dialogues: Engagements Between Africa and Its Diasporas”

Contextualizing the Caribbean diaspora with the major theme of this research of “a means” to an end reflects the multiple ways that the Afro-Caribbean participants in this study must simultaneously navigate complex realities of being immigrants and continuously work towards goals or an end that remains to be seen. This is true for Afro-Caribbean participants who are documented or undocumented, and regardless of their immigration status, their futures are marked by various degrees of uncertainty. The trajectory for these women in leaving their home countries and traversing the Caribbean Sea requires great sacrifice, and their arrival to New York often means the beginning of new journeys, of learning to navigate the different landscapes and communities in New York City before settling in areas in which their Caribbean culture is as closely reflective of home than if they were to stay in less diverse areas. These women migrate to live with family members who are somewhat already established or have been

acclimated to the challenges of living in New York. The Caribbean communities that they settle in, particularly that of the Northeast Bronx, are markedly diasporic areas because of the multiple movements that occur between African Americans, Africans, a few whites, and people come from different Caribbean islands, and it is the similarities and differences in those island cultures and African Americans that are reflected in the business establishments and churches in the community. It’s also reflected in certain green grocers that sell items typically found on one island, to the shared provisions that are found and used in all of them. It’s also those same grocers who are conscious that the Northeast Bronx is home to Africans from Ghana, Gambia, Senegal, and Nigeria and thus have bottles of palm oil covered in dust, or bags of pounded yam on store shelves in the oft chance that an African customer will purchase these items from the Korean green grocer instead of patronizing African-owned shops for groceries. This catering to the cultural food needs of ethnically diverse consumers is further recognition that although these immigrants always appear to be in constant motion moving between spaces for their personal, spiritual, social and professional lives, in doing so they maintain the local economy of the Northeast Bronx by patronizing local businesses.

The Caribbean diasporic space of the Northeast Bronx because of its complex and diverse Caribbean character is a space that because one is from the Caribbean, small conversations begin amongst women and men, and connections are made when questions are asked about good schools, schools run by African Americans or Afro-Caribbeans, churches and denominations to suit one’s spiritual or religious needs, or if anyone knows of “any work” as women struggle to find better employment opportunities. While these connections to Caribbean culture occur in the Northeast Bronx communities that they live, these Caribbean diasporic engagements also occur in the areas that they work like nursing homes, rehab centers located in the Northeast Bronx.
These connections also occur in work spaces away from home in Westchester, Connecticut, or Manhattan when they run into other women working as domestics from the Caribbean or Latin America taking children to activities, sitting and talking in the park while children play are playing, or when they decide to do grocery shopping together for their employer or spend the day together on their afternoon off if the commute home will be too expensive or arduous due to inclement weather. In these moments as women are performing in a work capacity that they seek commonality via culture or via experiences as immigrant women struggling to make ends meet.45

For Afro-Caribbean women it is the familiarity created because of one’s Caribbeanness but also because of the struggle to survive in the United States as a person not from “here” but being from the Caribbean, and that one’s state of being is in constant transformation. Even as they look back “home” for comfort, they are acutely aware that not even home stays the same, but the feeling they had when remembering the lives they once lived remains in them as a constant reminder of who they once were and perhaps who they really are when faced with adversity. These connections are not always born of common struggle but also in the joy of sharing food or baking cakes, or of doing side businesses with each other to supplement their wages, participating in financial saving collectives called “partners” or “sous sous”, or in community and church activities that are reflective of the community bonds established back home. These connections help to define the Northeast Bronx as a Caribbean space, defined by cultural scholar Carole Boyce Davies as “locations that preserve certain versions of Caribbean culture as they provide community support in migration. A product of diaspora, one can call it,

45 Grace, a Jamaican in her 50s who worked as nanny for almost 20 years had fond memories of the friendships she formed with nannies from Bosnia, the Eastern Caribbean, and Latin America.
Caribbean spaces are marked by their own self-identification…”46 The Caribbean space of the Northeast Bronx reflects the movements of Afro-Caribbean people who live there, but especially the mobility of Afro-Caribbean women who are constantly on the move doing, working, contributing in any way they can to homes in The Bronx and in the Caribbean.

The transformations and shifts that occur in the lives of Afro-Caribbean participants are in some ways unique to them as Afro-Caribbean women, but in other ways they are not. Scholars of African diasporic experiences discuss similar challenges of being labeled Black, and having to confront externally ascribed notions of Blackness while simultaneously engaging and articulating an understanding of Blackness that is authentic to who they are upon arrival. This negotiation of identities is rather difficult but is also speaks to the histories that Black immigrants carry with them.47 Boyce-Davies references the “portable identities” that Caribbean people carry with them as a result of migration and the constant movements of Caribbeans once they arrive.48 These complex portable identities of Blackness are marked by fluidity as Afro-Caribbeans and other Black ethnics negotiate understandings of Blackness they arrived with and those placed on them by U.S. society. These negotiations engender numerous ways of being, and being Black informed by gender roles, class and status positions, culture, and sexuality. This reality of occupying and embodying multiple ways of being also speaks to understandings of diasporic Blackness for the purposes of this research.

47 Scholars such as Carole Boyce Davies, Carolle Charles, Jemima Pierra, Georges Fouron among many others effectively capture the constant negotiations that occur around one’s Blackness post-migration.
48 Boyce Davies, Ibid., 61.
Many scholars of Black immigrant experiences discuss the challenges that African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants encounter when forced to confront and negotiate negative stereotypes of Blackness that are usually solely ascribed to African Americans but are used to blackwash African diasporic people who live outside of the United States. Diasporic Blackness speaks to the complexity of Black identities and the multiple consciousness and processes of being and experiencing Blackness. Through expressions of diasporic Blackness participants become fully cognizant that different histories and cultures inform different ways of being Black, and must navigate those different Black identities on a daily basis. According to Zeleza:

“Diaspora,” simultaneously refers to a process, a condition, a space, and a discourse: the continuous process by which a diaspora is made, unmade, and remade; the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself; the places where it is molded and imagined; and the continuous ways it is studied and discussed. It entails a culture and a consciousness, sometimes diffuse and sometimes concentrated in a “here” separate from a “there” that is often characterized by a regime of marginalization and a “there” that is invoked as a rhetoric of self-affirmation, of belonging to “here” differently. The emotional and experiential investment in “here” and “there” and the points in between, indeed in the very configurations and imaginings of “here” and “there” and their complex intersections, obviously changes in response to the shifting materialities, mentalities, and moralities of social existence.”

For the purposes of thinking about diasporic Blackness in relation to the Afro-Caribbean participants in this study, these women engage the self as a means of affirming who they were, who they are, and who they hope to be; and they negotiate externally ascribed notions of Blackness while expressing a diasporic Black consciousness that reflects their challenges of migration, and their present challenges of being immigrants, but also celebrates the beauty of who they are as Caribbeans and the complex cultural heritage of the islands they come from. It also reflects the internal engagement that Afro-Caribbean participants have with themselves.

49 Zeleza, Ibid., 32-33.
when experiencing racism, but this internal engagement with the self also occurs when life circumstances force women to clearly articulate who they are and what they’re made of to the person their engaging but more saliently to articulate verbally or silently to themselves. Drawing on Davies’ scholarship on Black women, writing, and migratory subjectivities, the attention and focus on how and what female Afro-Caribbean participants articulate allows for a gendered lens to view this internal engagement with the self. Davies posits that:

Geography is linked deliberately to culture, language, the ability to hear and a variety of modes of articulation. It is where one speaks from and who is able to understand, to interpret, that gives actuality of one’s expression. Many women speak, have spoken, are speaking but are rarely heard. From the many narratives in which peasant and working-class women tell of sexual and physical abuse and exploitation or their joys to audiences which do not want to hear them [speaks to] the reality that women are not seen as credible speakers or have no authority to speak their experience is an issue…it is not solely a question of physical geography, but location or subject position in their wider senses in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, access, education and so on.”

Contextualizing diasporic Blackness, gender, and culture, the narratives of the Afro-Caribbean in this study provide spaces from which we can understand the challenges of a segment of (undocumented) women who live in the Caribbean diasporic space of the Northeast Bronx, but because they are not counted as part of the 50,000 Afro-Caribbean residents in 2010 census records, we actually have no idea how many undocumented Afro-Caribbean residents live in the area. We also don’t know their stories of how they came to the United States, or the daily and weekly movements of Afro-Caribbean women as they navigate through the geographic spaces of The Bronx, Manhattan, Lower and Upper Westchester and Connecticut for work; despite their

51 See footnote 41
movements across these geographical areas too often Afro-Caribbean women are seen but not heard. So their stories of survival, of overcoming, of triumph are not attended to in wider discourses surrounding immigration reform. This project situates Afro-Caribbean women and men within that discourse of immigration reform by putting forth the personal narratives of struggle articulated by the participants themselves.

The Northeast Bronx communities provide a level of security amidst physical insecurity for Afro-Caribbeans whether or not they are documented. If the women are undocumented the circumstances under which they seek documentation through non-familial avenues usually via marriage, makes the women in particular vulnerable to multiple forms of exploitation. Even the very means of survival in performing random daily activities to seeking employment and working as domestics, companions, restaurant workers forces women to perform their cultural nationality to clearly articulate that they came all dis way, are here, and are present in this diasporic community. Referring to the Northeast Bronx as a diasporic community and a Caribbean space reflects the different cultures that collide and engage each other but also the Caribbean character of the space itself which is reflected in the Afro-Caribbean and non-Afro-Caribbean businesses, residential homes, and churches in the area.

While Zeleza is very critical of the way intellectuals deploy and apply the term “diaspora” to communities that don’t necessarily define themselves in that way, for the purposes of this project, the terms Caribbean diaspora, Caribbean space, and diasporic Blackness are not being deployed for careerist opportunities but to accurately reflect the complexities of connections and ruptures that are evident in this Northeast Bronx community that is home to a people from the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking Caribbean, with Spanish-speaking Caribbeans from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic as the Caribbean minority in
comparison to the English-speaking Caribbean majority from Antigua, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, St. Kitts and Nevis, Jamaica, Trinidad, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Each of these countries from the Caribbean has its own colonial history but the commonality among Afro-Caribbeans in this area is situated around a very rich and complex Caribbean culture. This cultural richness speaks to individuals in ways that reveal national cultural characteristics in which people express great pride about their countries of origin and the cultural characteristics that are specific to their respective Caribbean national cultures. In this regard, anthropological approaches to culture provide useful ways to analyze how Northeast Bronxites’ Caribbean national cultural expressions are displayed in social events, businesses, churches, funeral homes, and residences in the area, with residents patronizing businesses that respect the cultural norms of the Caribbean.

**The Importance of Culture**

Scholars of Caribbean migration have long posited that the cultural distinctions between African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans based on African Americans’ complex relationship to the structural and systemic racist history in the U.S. and the Afro-Caribbean historical relationship with colonialism produces a different understanding of Blackness. This fundamental difference between the two groups is proof positive that the African American v. Afro-Caribbean is a useful binary to understand Afro-Caribbean uplift and African American downward mobility. This argument put forth by Foner, Hintzen, Waters, Vickerman, Greer, and Rogers contributes to a facile use of culture that facilitates discourses of Caribbean exceptionalism via a socio-economic engagement of class that is too readily drawn from perceptions held by middle
class, or upper working class Caribbean professionals working in white collar industries. What comes forth from this scholarship is what I refer to as a Noble Negro and Caribbean exceptionalism framework in which “self-sacrificing” and “hard-working” Caribbeans are somehow better able to navigate the racist structural matrix of U.S. society. Ultimately, these deployments result in cultural arguments that do little to explain the complex gendered and racialized Afro-Caribbean experiences.

Sociologist Vilna Bashi contends that cultural approaches put forth to understand Afro-Caribbean progress ignore the complex and tight networks that immigrants use for support and to obtain jobs. Bashi’s research examined Afro-Caribbean immigrant networks in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. According to Bashi, these gendered networks facilitate what may be perceived as uplift because Afro-Caribbean women rely heavily on interpersonal networks to obtain work that they can keep for extended periods of time. Performing

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53 Bashi provides a thorough critique of how this specific cultural approach has taken off and become the sole means to analyze and theorize differences between African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. Bashi engages the work of Steinberg, Massey and Denton and specifically Portes’ critique of immigrant assimilationism to highlight the limitations of relying “on cultural explanations for differential social outcomes for people of different races.” Bashi, Survival of the Knitted, p. 210.

54 Bashi’s work in Survival of the Knitted is a multi-sited sociological project that uses network analysis to explore the lives of Caribbeans living in the UK, Canada, and New York. Bashi provides intimate portraits of the challenges of migration for many Afro-Caribbeans, but she also deftly outlines the obstacles that Caribbean people continue to encounter post-migration by focusing on race, class, and gender disparities in Caribbean networks.
domestic work and other forms of service work allows for a constant source of employment for Afro-Caribbean women. Conversely, for Afro-Caribbean men, the discourse around Caribbean uplift becomes even more nuanced because even though Afro-Caribbean men always appear to be working, the reality is that Afro-Caribbean men have had more jobs than Afro-Caribbean women because the men don’t have strong networks. Afro-Caribbean men don’t refer each other for work opportunities, and even when they land positions in white collar industries as a result of a network referral, the men are unable to capitalize off of such advancements by helping other men to move up the socio-economic ladder. Afro-Caribbean men not only have more jobs than Afro-Caribbean women, but the men also have a more diverse employment history in terms of the kinds of jobs the men are forced to take to support themselves. Ultimately, Bashi argues that cultural analyses of African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans are limited.

In this research I provide a more nuanced engagement of culture that disrupts the US v. Them binary that often gets recycled in contemporary scholarship and becomes a standard lens through which Afro-Caribbeans are studied. Sociologist Percy Hintzen describes West Indians as “self-proclaimed model minorities…” but his research is focused on middle class Afro-Caribbean professionals in the Bay area during the 1990s, Nancy Foner’s research on West Indians in New York uses the experiences of professional West Indians to put forth her argument of Caribbean uplift during the 1990s. By situating these arguments of Caribbean exceptionalism within socio-historical and socio-cultural contexts to explore the complexity of socio-economic class and status positions among African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans forces one to look at the myriad ways that these two groups transcended this binary through music; but also via the

55 Bashi, Ibid., 210-11.
entrance into the prison industrial complex.\(^{57}\) The significance of this argument to this research is that while Bashi critiques cultural approaches to Caribbean immigrants, what is missing is a varied class analysis that examines the experiences of working class and working poor Afro-Caribbean immigrants. What is also missing is how the concept of culture is applied. Clifford Geertz’s thick description offers more opportunities for deeper interpretations of Afro-Caribbean immigrant experiences and cultural anthropological engagements of culture to facilitate the ability to dig deeper beyond the binary but enables a richer analysis, particularly in reference to the gender dynamics in the barbershops.

Clifford Geertz reminds us that “[a] good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us into the heart of that which is the interpretation.”\(^{58}\) Part of my challenge as an ethnographer was to carefully observe the community of the Northeast Bronx and specifically how Afro-Caribbean women express and articulate themselves based on the things that are said, while also paying attention to thoughts and emotions are expressed in what is not said—to interpret the silences of women around their personal histories, their pre and post-migration challenges, and in sentiments expressed in sounds like sucking of teeth (Schewps) sound, and the pregnant pauses in between. This study required looking at Afro-Caribbeans through a different cultural lens than I ever had before, and

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\(^{57}\) The emergence of hip-hop during the late 1980s and its immense global popularity as a music genre during the 1980s and 1990s is a prime example of second-generation Caribbean immigrants and African Americans drawing on various musical genres to create a new genre of music infused with African, jazz, reggae among many other musical influences. Cool Herc, one of the founding fathers of hip-hop came from Jamaica as a teenager and immersed himself in DJ culture drawing on reggae, R &B and soul music at parties. See Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop* for a more in depth discussion. Hip hop defies binaries used to understand the differences between these two Black ethnic groups merging many Caribbean and African American cultures through music, food, and fashion. Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation.* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005).

recognizing that culturally there are differences in the way that Caribbean women express themselves, even when they come from the same island. It was interpreting layers of performance to see what was real, not for the sake of an overly simplistic label of these women as performers and caricatures of their authentic selves, but delving deeper into their oral histories and personal narratives to understand what the reality of their documented or undocumented circumstances would not allow them to fully reveal. In this vein, much like our conversations, the reader will be hit with revelations in the same way that the women revealed these tidbits to me.

This ethnographical writing method is done purposefully not out of laziness or an unwillingness to conform but specifically as a discursive practice that accurately reflects their realities especially for participants who are undocumented. There is no seamlessness to how their lives are ordered or structured, their lives are reflective of a fluid precarity and depending on the circumstances and interactions of the day can take them back to who they were before they migrated in an instant. That instantaneous jolt of life, reminds them of the unexpectedness of coming all dis way, the unexpected reality that they’ve been able to survive, and whether they married for their papers, or are waiting for their papers to be processed, they must now confront, negotiate, and process unexpected emotions and feelings about what they’ve done with their lives, the sacrifices they’ve made, and whether they have what it takes to still accomplish all the things they’d hoped they would’ve achieved at that time of that jolt. It also speaks to the multiple ways that Afro-Caribbean women, like other Black women and women of color in general, perform and do so much in the course of their daily lives that time and the stressors of

59 This discursive practice is utilized throughout the dissertation, especially in the second chapter which begins with selections from Caribbean literature to highlight the concept of lost innocence as a discursive genre that Caribbean women writers use to make sense of encounters with racism.
life do not permit them to really sit down and think about their place in the world or to really contextualize and articulate their experiences in a linear or cohesive manner.

In this vein, when I observed the cultural cues that Afro-Caribbean women emit when expressing themselves, it came to mind that many female Afro-Caribbean experiences can be examined utilizing intersectional approaches that address the multiple oppressions that women of color, and specifically Black women contend with on the basis of their race, gender and socio-economic class. However, analysis of the Afro-Caribbean experiences in this study reveals that Afro-Caribbean women, in addition to the societal stresses brought on by intersectional oppressions that culture plays a significant role in understanding the complex challenges and identities of Afro-Caribbean women and those of their partners. Caribbean cultural norms reveal that class must not be solely examined with socio-economic contexts, but class also refers the social status of individuals, which in many regards may supersede any socio-economic class categorizations or accomplishments. These cultural understandings and expressions of class via status are revealed in phrases like: “never see, come see” or “why you put yourself in a barrel when a matches box can hold yu?” or “dem neva know dem woulda wear shoes” are indicative of people who have tried to claim a higher social status but lack the proper etiquette and appropriate mannerisms to claim such status, and are thus relegated to a lower social or “class” status by the individuals making the comments and by all who are within earshot of such remarks.

Weber\textsuperscript{60} attends to these class and status distinctions by departing from political economic Marxist definitions of class. Instead, Weber addresses class within the context of

status groups and social classes. The benefit of such approaches allows for a theoretical lens to analyze the complex class relationships among the Afro-Caribbean participants in this research who look at their class status not solely via occupation, but through the class stratification in their communities in which a certain elevated status may be ascribed and given to certain groups of people based on their contributions to the community, which may also include their contributions to the Caribbean communities that they come from. Weber contends that:

“status groups are normally communities. They are, however, often of an amorphous kind. In contrast to the purely economically determined “class situation” we wish to designate as “status situation” every typical component of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor…But status honor need not necessarily be linked with a “class situation.” On the contrary, it normally stands in sharp oppositions to the pretensions of sheer property…”\(^{61}\)

For a few of my participants this privileged status honor is directly related to their maintenance of certain charitable endeavors or contributions to local churches in the Caribbean, their occupation as former teachers, administrators, or business owners, or their family’s privileged status honor that passed down to them. This intricate relationship between class situation and status honor is reflected throughout this research through the participants themselves and the choices they make, particularly those who are undocumented and came from a lower socio-economic class position in the Caribbean, and thus attempt to mitigate their precarity by appropriating status honor. Women who are documented but come from a higher socio-economic class position deploy their privileged status honor as a means of displaying their privilege and education by distinguishing themselves from those seeking appropriate status

\(^{61}\) Max Weber, Ibid., 117
honor and become their equals. These complex class and status dynamics are reflected in the third chapter.

Chapter Two: “All Dis Way: Afro-Caribbean Women’s Narratives of Migration Across the Caribbean Diaspora”

Note: All of the participants vetted me as an ethnographer by my Caribbeanness, once vetted the women and their family members were able to reveal intimate portraits of their lives. I would not have been able to obtain the narratives if I were not an Afro-Caribbean woman of Jamaican parentage. My identity and performance of my Caribbeanness created safe spaces for the women, especially for undocumented participants. All of the participants names have been changed to reflect their personalities and is indicative of the level of intimacy I was able to cultivate to document their experiences.

“The Caribbean has always been a region associated with migration and circulation, starting with the Arawaks and Caribs who moved to the islands from mainland South America. The Caribbean is an area of introduced peoples. Africans and Europeans migrated (some freely, others not) beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, virtually eradicating the native inhabitants. Asian migrants, mainly from India and China, were added in the nineteenth century, as a wave of indentured labourers arrived. The Caribbean region has therefore one of the most diverse populations in the world, reflecting a mix of African, European and Asian ethnic heritages. Migration and mobility are facts of life for Caribbean people.”

-Olywn M. Blouet, The Contemporary Caribbean: History, Life and Culture since 1945

The Caribbean participants in this study migrated to the United States from 1961-2008 and over the course of this forty year period, all of them entered the United States labor market

via the service-sector. During this time period, the United States, and specifically New York City’s landscape underwent many political, economic, and socio-cultural changes. The landscape of the African and Caribbean diasporas changed as well with many nations fighting for and obtaining independence from their former colonizers. The fragile economies of these newly independent nations meant that economic stability was heavily reliant on agricultural and mineral exports. Through personal narratives we learn about the Caribbean nations that these women migrated from and the shifting New York settings they encountered upon arrival.

1961

The oldest participant Joan Gadson⁶³ who will be referred to as Lady J, migrated to the United States from Belize on February 4, 1961 during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Belize would not gain full independence from the British until September 1, 1981, more than 20 years after Lady J’s migration. During those 20 years, Jamaica gained independence on August 6, 1962, Guyana gained independence on May 26, 1966, Barbados’ independence came on November 30, 1966 and Dominica’s independence on November 3, 1978. With the exception of two women, one -Hispanic from Costa Rica, and an Afro-Cuban American woman, all of the women I interviewed who perform service-sector work for a living came from the countries listed above.

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⁶³ Joan Gadson is the only participant who insisted her name be listed somewhere in this research. She told me that while pseudonyms are fine, she needed to have her story told, so that there will be a record of the life and that her grandchildren will know where they came from. “I want my story told, especially for my granddaughter. She’s a special child, and one day she will have my journals…When she is of age, of course. By that time, she will know what to do with it, and will gain strength from knowing how powerful we are as Black women, so that no matter what she goes through, she will know where she comes from and what’s in her blood…”
Lady J was not able to personally witness the anti-colonial movements occurring in the Caribbean but through newspapers, radio, letters from home, phone calls and family networks she kept abreast of the different changes occurring in Belize at the time. However, Lady J did have a front row seat to the economic, racial and cultural climate of the United States before her plane even landed in New York. Lady J reflected on her path to the United States and shared her introduction to United States culture:

*I came to America to work, to look for a better way of life. That was my goal and to be the best that I can be. Not that that couldn’t happen in Belize, but I felt the need to go out into the world and explore... Immediately after [high school] there was what you call [college], and I got a job and saved my monies working as a teacher’s assistant, and those were the monies that helped pay my carfare to America. You know my mother borrowed a part of it, and at that time you could not come to America without having some money because it was important that you do not become part of a public ward. So my mother borrowed $250 to put with the monies that I had. My monies paid for the plane fare and my mother’s money was for the monies that you had to have to [live] here, and the week after I got here, I returned the money to my mother.*

CAP: Who did you come here to?:

Lady J:

*I came to an uncle who left Belize about 20 or 30 years earlier that no one saw since he came to America but there was this communication that continued with his home. And I found an address and wrote to him and asked him to send for me and he sent a request for me to visit in America, and that’s how the visa was*
granted and I arrived in America on February 4, 1961 in the midst of a horrible, horrible snowstorm\textsuperscript{64}. Never saw snow in my life. Horrible! I had on a grey topper and some white shoes. People looked at me as though I came from Mars (laughing aloud) HaHahaaaahhh.

Got in the train, threw up all over the train, but before I got to New York, the plane—Tonka Airlines at the time, landed in Miami. And when we landed in Miami, of course the snowstorm was RAGING in New York. I found myself with a group of people from Honduras, from Spanish Honduras. They became like my parents because I was just this frightened girl. And that was my first taste of BLATANT racism. We went to this hotel. The airline was putting us up because they couldn’t land in New York, and this gentleman at the desk said to us “you can’t come in here, we don’t allow niggers in here.” Blew. Me. Away! We went to another place and they put us up for two nights. I looked on the phone, I didn’t know how to use the phone. I was petrified. Finally we were able [to leave]. Like I said, these people took care of me, this woman’s name was Christine. Beautiful Hispanic woman, Black Hispanic woman and um and it was her and two of her cousins. So when we got to the airport, my uncle still didn’t come, my aunt came and got me. And we took the train, now this was a woman I never met, and while we were on the train, I guess she must’ve been looking at me strange

\textsuperscript{64} According to The New York Times, the storm on February 3-4, 1961 was a very bad snowstorm in which the metropolitan area airports were forced to cancel flights and Mayor Robert F. Wagner declared an emergency due to record 17.4 inches of snow that fell in 28 hours. According to the article most people called the storm a blizzard, even Mayor Wagner, but the “Weather Bureau said it was too warm and the snow was wet instead of powdery.” NYT McCandlish Philips “17-Inch Snow Paralyzes City; Mayor Declares Emergency; Storm Ties Up the Northeast” Feb 5, 1961 Pg 1; p46. One can just imagine how frightening this experience must have been for a young woman of 19 coming to New York for the first time.
too, because she said, “you’re Clarence’s niece?” and I said “Yes”. And they took me after all this mess, (after me being sick on the train), we ended up at their apartment on 129th Street in Harlem. And that was my initiation to this culture.

CAP: Wow! What was some initiation (laughter).

Lady J:  
  Frightening, but it exposed to me what was to come in my life in this country.

CAP: So your first introduction is to the segregated South

Lady J:  
  Absolutely! Miami, Florida! (laughter). I knew my mother borrowed that money and I KNEW that money had to go back because I had this feeling that this was a place where you [could] make money! I had no idea the trials and tribulations but I KNEW that somehow, I was going to make it.

CAP: What was your first job?

Lady J:  
  Domestic, my aunt did days work and she would get me work. I will never forget working in Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn for $10/day plus 15 cents for carfare, 15 cents for the token on the train. I will never forget being down in people’s basements with cats and rats, [and] rats as big as cats! You know just helping to take care of people, people who were twice my size, trying to help them to get into the bathroom. I did some of everything.

CAP: How long were your days?

Lady J:  
  Well when I did the days work it [was] going in the mornings and when you were finished in the afternoon you went home. Then when I had the sleep in jobs,
which I had quite a few of those, it was working 6 days a week, 1 day off every other Sunday, that was $35 a week and you were on call any time.

CAP: Did you feel that you had other options, in terms of employment?

Lady J: No, because the people that I came to, my uncle worked for the railroad and he was gone for much of the time. I didn’t realize then that my uncle had 2 families, so I was with 1 of the families. (Loud Laughter) The family I was with, my uncle had a daughter and a son, the daughter was a few years younger than I [was] and the son was even younger than that. So my aunt, I used to call her my Aunt Bernice, she worked. She had these days jobs, and that’s what I did. That’s what I did. Then it got to the point where I also worried about my visa, because I came on a visitor’s visa, so what could I do? I HAD TO EAT!65

Beneath Lady J’s narrative are several issues common to immigrants in terms of the unfamiliar surroundings and being immersed in unusual family dynamics for the sake of survival. What is also common is the inability for her uncle to return home to Belize for a visit most likely due to family obligations, and in her uncle’s case that meant contributing to 2 households while working for the railroad company. Lady J’s “initiation” to United States culture, meant a coarse introduction to the segregated South, a meeting with racism that she may have never envisioned having before her arrival to New York. Lady J left a Belize on the brink of independence but

65 Lady J needing to eat, required not only securing work, but a year later, marrying a young African American man who lived in the same building in order to secure her papers. She admitted to me that she didn’t marry for love, but eventually grew to love her husband and stayed married for almost thirty years. After having three kids, her marriage allowed her to file for her mother and sister so their family could be reunited. Unfortunately, her father passed away years before she was able to file for him.
due to Honduras’ power in the region it took twenty years for Belize to get there. O. Nigel Bolland writes that in 1961 it was determined that:

“Britain was confident that [like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago] Belize too was ready for independence. Such readiness was defined in terms of internal and external affairs: Internally, it meant that Belize had become accustomed to the form of parliamentary democracy known as the Westminster-Whitehall model, had adopted basic human rights and freedoms in its constitution, including the protection of property, and a legal system based upon the British one; and externally, it meant that Belize was expected to maintain its traditional allegiances and trade connections in international and economic affairs.”

It should not be lost that in 1961, as Britain was determining the viability of some Caribbean nations gaining independence by a nation’s ability to adopt basic human rights, that Britain’s race relations were less volatile than the United States’ but were still inequitable at best. Lady J’s first encounter of blatant racism in Miami, Florida, helped her to understand that Blacks in the United States were not afforded basic human rights via the U.S. constitution. The irony of this Belizean citizen leaving a nation that wouldn’t gain independence for another twenty years, to migrate to a nation in which its citizens, by virtue of their Blackness alone, were deemed incapable and too irresponsible to handle the rights of citizenship, meant that even upon attaining U.S. citizenship many years later, Lady J was well aware that her citizenship, had limitations, albeit in this wonderful land of opportunity.

The year 1961 was also the year of The Bay of Pigs, in which Cuban exiles attempted to invade Cuba and unseat Castro with assistance from the CIA. Her initial arrival to Miami, Florida reveals another irony: as upper and middle-class Cubans were vying to return to their homeland, Lady J was a young woman from Belize with hopes and aspirations to make money in

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the United States, mainly to escape the confines of her Belizean country. The class and color differences are remarkable with these two crossings of the Caribbean Sea separated by two months: the elite landowning Cubans who fled Cuba to the United States, most of whom were light-skinned people hoping to regain their wealth, land, and power through the execution of The Bay of Pigs; and Lady J, a dark-skinned, working class Belizean who left her country hoping to obtain wealth here in the United States. The rest of Lady J’s story will unfold in other chapters, but her introduction to the United States reflected an immersion into the blatant racism United States culture that warrants further attention.

Lady J’s “initiation” into the United States was marked by alienation, nurturing, and rejection. Unbeknownst to her at the time she was also being marked by race upon her arrival. The foreignness of a new country and the inability to reach her final destination due to weather is one challenge, but being called a “nigger” by a hotel worker, was symbolic of a racial marking embedded in a history and at that time a reality of state sanctioned, institutionalized racism via the system called segregation. Her initiation involved an immersion into a history and culture not her own. The nurturing and familial kindness extended to her by Christine and her family, helped to soften the blow of blatant racism, but not enough to erase it. The experience of being marked by race in 1961 is also indicative of an instantaneous way of being Black in the United States that is stained with a simultaneous history lesson and information session: 1. the hotel worker informing this group of Afro-Caribbean women that they would not be able to enter the hotel and 2. being a foreigner who is instantly equipped with the knowledge that her Blackness prevents her from staying in the hotel, and that Lady J’s hopes, dreams, and aspirations of becoming wealthy will be marked by the reality that she will have different experiences than those who are privileged to not be Black in the United States. Lady J’s distinction of this
“initiation” as blatant racism reveals that during the course of her life here in the United States she encountered varying degrees of racism, but the experience of blatant racism upon arrival is a powerful memory and introduction to United States culture, too powerful to forget. In many regards, Lady J’s initiation follows a familiar pattern of virtually every immigrant group that migrated to the United States since the turn of the twentieth century. Lady J, like the Chinese, Japanese, Irish, Italians, Jews and Mexicans was not wanted, but her Blackness meant a different acculturation and assimilation than every other group.

1980s

Six of my participants, Charity, Prayerful, Faithful Steward, Jovial, Kind Spirit and Sophisticated Palava migrated from Jamaica to the United States during the 1980s, all between the years 1983-1989. This section will include personal histories of some of the participants listed above. A brief discussion of the entire decade will be explored to highlight some of the complexities and similarities in their migration narratives. The 1980s in the Caribbean was a period of radical, revolutionary, anti-western intellectualism and activism. As a result, the Caribbean was greatly impacted by the assassination of Walter Rodney from Guyana (June 13, 1980); the execution of Maurice Bishop from Grenada (October 19, 1983); The Cold War; and the removal of Manuel Noriega from Panama (December 20, 1989). The Reagan administration was driven by a desire to position the United States as the most powerful nation in the Western hemisphere via its foreign policy, and the utilization of Reaganomics to structure the U.S. economy exemplified its attempt to claim status as a super power. The 1980’s was a tense and strained economic period for many Caribbean countries, and Jamaica with only twenty years into
its status as an independent Caribbean nation was grappling with ways to obtain economic stability and have a place in the global economy. With Michael Norman Manley’s two terms as prime minister ending in 1980 and beginning in 1989 representing the People’s National Party and Edward Seaga serving as prime minister representing the opposition, Jamaica Labour Party, the political atmosphere resonated through all strata of Jamaican society, with the working poor and middle classes bearing the brunt of the tumultuousness. Jamaica’s unstable economy and contentious political climate created the ideal circumstances for many Jamaicans to migrate. Charity, a recently retired maintenance worker, migrated to New York City in 1984. Unlike Lady J, Charity was a business owner when she decided to migrate due to the violent political climate in Jamaica at the time. Like Lady J, Charity had her own set of expectations of what could be attained by living in the United States.

Why did you come here?

Charity: *Well, um… 1982. There was a political violence in Jamaica, and almost everyone was leaving the country and we almost got kill on Marcus Garvey Drive. We went to buy goods for the store, because I own four business[es] there, and they almost shoot us. And then my husband came home and call his brother and say “Time to go!” I didn’t want to come here because I live like a middle class in Jamaica, and finally two years after he came, I came here and join him and it was really hard. Really, really hard. I’ve never known that you have so many discrimination. Really, really tough but I made it through.*

CAP: When you came here, how did you adjust to living here?

Charity: *OOOH My God! When I came here I thought I would see gold lying from the airport coming in, (laughter). Yeah, I thought I would see gold lying on the road.*
I mean I was totally shocked, I wasn’t expecting to see all these close-up joining building, dirty looking place. I was looking for [something] spectacular and nice, sophisticated, nice building you know? But [it’s] not until you go down in Manhattan before you see [anything].

Charity then shared an encounter that will be discussed in the chapter on class, but in that encounter, she had to inform the person at the employment agency in White Plains that she was not going to take a low-paying job as a domestic because she was not a slave. Ultimately, even though Charity migrated to the United States, it was not due to a lack of opportunities there because she owned several businesses, Charity was in search of a safer life for herself and her family, and her business owner status neither insulated her from the warring political factions in the western parish of Westmoreland, nor provided entrée into the U.S. labor market earning above minimum wage.

CAP: Were you involved in politics back home?

Charity: Actually, it was [in] Westmoreland where I have my store, one of the politicians came, I forget who it was, but it was the PNP Party, they came and ask me if I could let my son [volunteer and help with them] because dey see my son, nice looking boy play table tennis an so, and I say Hell NO! NO! NO politician [gwain] help me to raise my child, and it’s a filthy thing. I don’t want to lose them and be involved in it, it’s not fair, it’s not right, NO. So I was totally against it, because they don’t do di right thing, it’s a corrupted [system]. They use you, there’s nothing done in this world by politicians that is 100% right, it’s corrupted. And then back in de West Indies isle, dey will kill you, dey are so ignorant
because that’s what cause me to be here, because of the shooting. My business place was [shot up], di place full ah bullet hole. My sister was sleeping in her bed and 2 o’clock in the morning we hear bururrerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr, barrage of shot, she get shot, and I had to lie on the floor. That’s why I’m here, even right now, my son [who runs the shop, tell mi] the supervisor fi di shop have to stop come because dem threaten fi kill her. Schewps. Hmph.

While Charity left Jamaica to escape political conflict in her neighborhood in 1984, Prayerful arrived in New York in 1985 to be with her husband who arrived 5 years earlier to establish a foundation for Prayerful and their four children. During their 5 year separation Prayerful moved from a parish in the country— St. Elizabeth to Kingston so she could find work to support her children while her husband was away. Prayerful worked in a factory in Kingston, Jamaica sewing clothes to support her children, although her husband sent money down regularly for them, it was still hard for Prayerful to provide for their four children, with the two sets of children separated by ten years. Due to Prayerful’s long hours working in the factory, Prayerful’s older set often looked after their younger siblings while she was at work. She also relied on the kindness of neighbors to check in on her children while she worked.

CAP: Did you want to come here?
Prayerful: Yes, I did want to come here.
CAP: What was your life like back home?
Prayerful: Hmm, it wasn’t that good. It was hard, cause you know, with de job, (schewps) life was very hard raising de children. And then I was living in de city at dat time. I did move from de country to de city— Kingston, and
life was very hard in de city. So I did want to come here, I did very much want to come here.

CAP: What kind of work did you do?

Prayerful: Well, I used work in factories in Kingston, you know garment factories? Dat I used to do, and on de side I used to sew, sew dresses and stuff like that.

CAP: How long did you work in the factories?

Prayerful: I work in de factories like, maybe 12 years before I left to come here.

CAP: Did you have any help with the kids?

Prayerful: In town, in Kingston?

CAP: Yeah.

Prayerful: Not really, you see they go to school and then I go to work. You know de bigger ones help tek care of de smaller ones. And you know neighbors out dere, dem help each other. If no one not even in yu personal family at home, true is tenement yard, they could still come home and stay dere til somebody come, because other people in de home, and you know they would really look out fi de children dem.

CAP: How was that experience for you, working long hours and being away from your kids?
Prayerful: *It was hard, really, really hard. Mi deh a work all day, worried bout de pickney dem, wondering if dem alright, if dem mek it to school alright, if deh mek it home alright, if de neighbor dem really check pon dem fi mek sure dem eat, ‘cause sometimes...or if any food is even dere fi dem fi eat.

Bwoy it did rough! Hmph [sighing heavily].

Prayerful’s experiences speaks to many issues, the challenges of transnational families when one parent is abroad and the other parent must struggle to raise children and work, often functioning as a single parent while his/her spouse is away. With no family nearby to rely on for support, Prayerful had to use the resources available to her—her community in the tenement yard.67 The kinship networks in the tenement yard speak to community members willing to provide support and assistance to each other, namely because their cultural norms and class status dictate how people relate to each other and the level of compassion they had for Prayerful’s single parent status. Prayerful’s past also addresses the many ways that older siblings have to function as parents or guardians while their parents are away working. In speaking to Prayerful’s youngest daughter, Kindness, she expressed that her older sister treated her like a daughter:

“Looking back, Generous really did a lot, and now as a mother, I recognize the sacrifice she made as a teenager to look after me and Scholar. It was really a lot. Generous made sure I ate, had clean uniforms to go to school, ironed my uniforms and helped with my homework, and bathed me before [our mother]

67 Roger Mais’ *The Hills Were Joyful Together* is a seminal text in Caribbean literature that creates a complex portait of kinship ties, poverty and Jamaican culture among residents in the “yard”–tenement yard in Kingston. Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila’s work on transnational families also speaks to the challenges of transnational parenting. See “I’m Here but I’m There: Meaning of Latina Transnational Motherhood.” (*Gender & Society*, 11:5, 1997) 548-571.
arrived in the evenings from work. Our oldest brother, Calm would look after Scholar, because you know Scholar and I are just 2 years apart, so Calm would do the same things for Scholar that Generous did for me, but moreso in the things related in the boys department. Just thinking about it, I want to cry...because that was a lot to bear, but when I think of it, our mom had it hardest. It must have been really difficult to rely on her older kids to do what she used to do. God! Life hard eh?! Hmph! It’s amazing we survived, but it could’ve been worse, so mi just say thank God!”

You know our dad could’ve forgotten us, but he didn’t, he kept his word. So many men come ah foreign and abandon dem family because the pressures of life are too much, not Good Times, he stuck it out. You know coming here and realizing the challenges of being an immigrant in this country, mi really admire him. He could’ve chosen differently, the easy route, but instead he kept his word. Fi dat alone, mi rate him, because God knows what this country did to him as a Black man back then. Wooooie! It’s AMAZING we survived! Black people strong fi true!”

The challenges that both Prayerful and her daughter Kindness speak of, highlight the realities of many transnational families facing emigration. One parent is away, so everyone has to step up to the plate and take on more responsibilities. Kindness also revealed that her parents were unmarried when her father migrated.

“Christine, I don’t know if I told you but Good Times and my mom weren’t married when he left. At that time and where we come from in country, people
really didn’t force you to marry. Common law was and is common. People de
together for 20, 30, 40 years have how much kids, nobody nah go no whe. Where
would anybody go? Where we come from in St. Elizabeth people respect that
commitment and really don’t encroach on people’s relationships like that. Good
Times migrated and came back and married her. You know how easy it would
have been to walk away from FOUR kids? He kept his promise though, I’m really
proud of that.”

Kindness’ remarks show that she is acutely aware that while her parents eventually got married,
hers father could have made different choices, and fortunately for them as a family, abandonment
was not an option.

Prayerful and Kindness’ reflections also speak to the challenges of childrearing absent of
technology. Raising children without access to technology or very limited technology was
commonplace during the late 1970s to early 1980s. Neither Prayerful nor her children had cell
phones to communicate whether the children arrived to school safely, got home safely from
school in the afternoons, or if they had food to eat. When they lived in the country they did not
have a telephone and there was no phone in the tenement yard, so Good Times and Prayerful
relied more on letters to communicate with each other than phone calls. At best, Kindness
recalls being able to speak to her father on the phone, once every three months and due to the
expense it would only be for a few seconds to say hello. During the course of my fieldwork,
Good Times passed away and didn’t have the mental capacity to be interviewed before passing,
but I often wondered what his experiences were being separated from his wife and children with
limited communication via technology, as well as what his experience was as a Jamaican man
working in the service sector for almost twenty years.
Limited communication between a parent and child can be very stressful and nerve-wracking especially when children are much younger. For Faithful Steward, a Jamaican in her late 50s remembered that she would call her family every chance she had, despite the expense. Faithful, as a trained and college educated teacher in Jamaica for almost a decade, worked as a domestic taking care of her employer’s children for almost three years while her two small children remained in Jamaica with her husband. Faithful Steward recalled how gut wrenching and painful it was to be unable to raise her daughter and son during their formative years when she migrated in 1985.

“You don’t know how I cried, and cried, and cried, praying to God that I would be able to be with my family. I missed them so much, especially my baby, I left when she was a year, and didn’t get to be with her til she was 4, almost 5. Only GOD know! You know, she refused to eat certain foods because I wasn’t there to feed her? When I got a chance to go home, she would only eat them from me. When mi gone, anybody try to feed her cornmeal or oats porridge she vomit it up. Right up! God! Tinking bout it mi wan bawl! All dat I put her through fi come ah dis country. God only know… (sighing heavily).

When I asked Faithful who took care of her children while she was gone, she replied, her husband, Singer. “Oooohhhh yes! He took care of them for me, and we hired a helper to help out with them so he could get to work on time, but when the helper wasn’t there, Singer did EVERYTHING! I thank God for him every day!” Having knowledge of the gender cultural norms in Jamaica in which the social reproductive tasks of the household are typically relegated to women or female children, I asked her if he was okay with that. Faithful’s replied:
“Of course! We discussed it for a very long time as to how things were going to be managed in my absence. We knew it wouldn’t be for long, because once I get my papers, I would send for him, and then we all could be together as a family. It was part of the plan. It wasn’t easy, but we made it work. Looking back, I wonder how I was able to save, because sometimes all my money went to phone card, because talking to my little girl just light up my world, and granted we would both be crying when I got off the phone, I knew it was only for a time. It was the only way I could get through, knowing that my family was depending on me and that we would be together…Honey if it was for me one, I wouldn’t have made it.

Hahahaahhh (laughing).”

Clearly Faithful and Prayerful came from two different class backgrounds because Faithful’s middle class status and career as a teacher, afforded her the luxury of living in a home with a telephone. Her job working as a domestic in New York also paid her well enough to bear the expense of regular phone calls to keep in contact with her children and husband. However, one can surmise that as time passed, Faithful had to learn to save her monies to able to afford the plane fares of her husband and two kids, and so spending her salary on phone cards would have defeated the purpose behind the decision to migrate.

Unlike Prayerful, Faithful migrated during the 1980s under an employer sponsorship program which enabled her to receive her immigration papers after working for an employer for a number of years. While Faithful had to learn to parent from a distance leaving her children with her husband, Prayerful had to adjust to parenting without her partner Good Times. The circumstances of migration demonstrate that both Faithful and Prayerful defy notions of the male
breadwinner in the family dynamic due to the realities of transnational parenting. It is also
clear that technological access varies depending on one’s class position, for Faithful her family’s
middle class status afforded them the ability to hire a helper and have a telephone inside the
home. Faithful’s reality reflects that of many domestics who must hire people to care for their
own children while they raise someone else’s. For families like Prayerful’s and Good Times,
one cannot miss and yearn for what they do not know, with no paid helper to assist with the
younger set of children, they relied on letters and phone calls at the local store to communicate.
The older set of children helped with the social reproductive tasks of the household and
community members in the tenement yard provided an extended kinship network of support. I
doubt with long hours working at a factory, Prayerful neither had the time nor energy to
contemplate that which she couldn’t afford. Prayerful functioned like most working class
parents and did the best that she could with what she had because life was hard enough just
trying to survive.

The lack of access to technology wasn’t a major consideration prior to migration for
Prayerful and Good Times. In fact, it reflected a simpler way of life, indicative of living in
Jamaica and being a working class citizen. Once Prayerful migrated in 1985, she worked
multiple jobs as a home health aide which prevented her from calling home regularly to check on
her two youngest children. This post-migration reality was one that her factory job in Kingston
already prepared her for. Prayerful’s work experience will be explored in more depth in the
chapter on labor, but working as a home health aide in the Bronx in 1985, Prayerful had no idea
how her 11 year old daughter and 13 year old son were doing. She, like most working parents

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68 For an excellent analysis that challenges the male breadwinner role, see Helen Safa’s *Myth of
the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean*. (Oxford: Westview
Press, 1995).
would not see them until she arrived home late in the evening from work. Being forced to leave her children under the care of older siblings and neighbors in a tenement yard was one thing in Kingston, Jamaica—a country and area she was familiar with. However, leaving her children and praying they would get home safely from school, walking through South Bronx streets strewn with crack vials and hypodermic needles posed new dangers that neither she nor her children were prepared for. With her older children working to contribute to the household, her youngest set had to fend for themselves by cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry for the entire family because all the adults were busy working and the social reproductive tasks of the household still needed to be performed. When I asked Kindness how she managed, she replied:

“It taught me compassion—compassion for my mother. I didn’t know what her job duties entailed beyond the stories she would tell, but when she came home and said she was tired, I felt very bad for her. If we didn’t help out, there was no way she could get through all that needed to be done. It was scary though seeing all those needles on the sidewalk as you walked to school each day, I was so scared that one of them would stick me. Even then as a child, I wondered what kind of place is this that allows its people to live like this.”

Prayerful’s story reveals that the challenges of migration are felt by everyone, and the families that survive are those that share the load even when living in a community in which the conditions that surround them seem inhumane. Prayerful’s remarks also reflect a South Bronx community that was severely under-resourced and lacking many of the social, economic, and political resources to guarantee safe living conditions for its working poor and working class residents.
Kindnesses reflections reveal that for all their poverty stricken circumstances in Kingston, there was a sense of humanity and compassion amidst their poverty, a compassion she didn’t see when she arrived in the South Bronx. They were united as a family but the exposure to poverty in United States was different to the community they left behind. The challenges of being working parents took on new dimensions with both her parents working in New York’s service sector. The consequences of being an Afro-Caribbean woman working in the service sector will be discussed later in the chapter, after a brief discussion of the 1990s and 2000s.

1990s

More than thirty years after Lady J’s arrival to family, and 10 years after Prayerful and her children migrated to New York Grace arrived in 1995 hoping for a change of luck in her health. Grace has a chronic medical condition and came to visit with her sister in the hopes of receiving better medical treatment than what she was receiving in Jamaica. Within months of her arrival Grace began performing domestic work for a living, and after overstaying her visa, decided after a few years later to have her sister file immigration papers for her. Grace opted to take the longest route to obtain a permanent immigration status than suffer any abuse or exploitation through an arranged marriage. Grace, like most of the participants did not migrate due to financial reasons, or a desire to advance her education, or to be with family, but for an opportunity to obtain the best healthcare for a serious pre-existing medical condition.

The 1990s was a period of both economic opportunity and economic downturns in the United States. The popular Caribbean phrase “if United States sneeze, the Caribbean catches cold” could not have been more indicative of the state of the Caribbean during the 1990s to the
present. During the 1990s, Jamaica was still trying to stabilize its economy via the structural adjustment agreements made under the Manley administration in the late 1970s and early 1980s. While Grace had job security as an educator and school administrator, there was a limit to Grace’s career success. Regarding herself and her family as upper middle class to elite, Grace as a school administrator would never become part of the elite, but she was quite content living an upper middle class life with her family having a prominent position in Jamaican politics in addition to owning large amounts of land. Jamaica, like most nations around the world, has a high regard for teachers, but the salaries of Jamaican teachers are not sufficient to launch them into the upper echelons of society. The value of being a teacher can be regarded as having high social capital and economic stability in Jamaica, but the reality is that Grace, post-migration, made more money as a domestic, tending to children than she did as a teacher in Jamaica, despite her family’s elite status and political power. According to Weber’s theory of class and status, Grace would be classified as belonging to a privileged class status having inherited that status from her family’s position but also due to her own social and professional contributions to Jamaican society. Even though her job title reflected a lower socio-economic class position when she worked as a nanny, Grace’s privileged status group association remained with her and was actually reflected in what she deemed a middle-class income working for an elite white family for the vast majority of her time in the U.S.

During the course of my fieldwork I encountered at least six women who were teachers in Jamaica, but regularly traveled to the United States to perform domestic work during the summer months. One woman, I met at a social gathering noted that “she was trying to get a “likkle roast” for a likkle extra pocket money, to make some upgrades to her house in Jamaica.” Upon seeing pictures of this woman’s home on her phone, she lived in what is considered a small
mansion in the United States, as I looked at the bathroom she was upgrading, I realized that the U.S. dollar stretches further in the Caribbean, and it would take more than a summer’s worth of wages to get my existing bathroom to look like her current bathroom. It would take a few years of savings. The task of this woman coming to New York to work as a domestic for a few months at a lower class status was worth the sacrifice to maintain her middle class status living in a mansion as a teacher in Jamaica. Occupying multiple class statuses is not uncommon for Afro-Caribbean immigrant women, particularly if they are undocumented or just visiting temporarily on a visitor’s visa. The reality is that for the upper middle class and elite families that they work for in the United States, the challenges of finding affordable childcare without providing healthcare benefits to the women who take care of their homes and children may actually be a cost-saving measure depending on the ages of the employer’s children. If the arrangement is amenable to both parties, the summer employment or “likkle roasts” helps to maintain the middle class statuses of both the employer and employee in New York and the Caribbean. Returning to one’s former occupation is a lot easier when it is on a temporary basis, but when one has been performing domestic work for over 15 years, the decision to return to teaching is not an easy one.

In 2011, during the course of my data collection, Grace finally obtained her immigration papers and she decided to leave her job as a domestic to return to teaching. Making this decision was not an easy one since Grace would earn far less money as a teacher in New York at an independent school, than she did working as a domestic for her elite Upper West Side employers, one of whom was a strategist for a presidential campaign. Grace’s main impetus to return to teaching stemmed from a desire to contribute or “pay into di system,” referring to social security, so she could “have something to draw when she retires.” The desire to contribute to the system is one that came up repeatedly among participants. While I never asked participants whether
they were here legally, I surmised by the age and urgency of some women to “pay into di system” is because they were undocumented. This issue of social security and the benefits of being part of the informal and formal labor sector will be addressed more thoroughly in the last chapter.

Grace, a teacher and school administrator left an unstable Jamaican economy to enter an unstable U.S. labor market due to health reasons. According to Percival Griffiths, a former policy maker and Executive Director of the Social Development Commission in Jamaica during the 1990s, Jamaica in the 1990s, dealt with: high gas prices due to the structural adjustment agreements of the previous decades; and a struggling economy that forced middle class Jamaicans to make tough budgetary choices for the survival of their families. As a result of the economic decline struggling working class and poor Jamaicans suffered the most. According to Mr. Griffiths, Jamaica also saw an unprecedented takeover of all Black owned financial institutions under then, Prime Minister, P.J. Patterson, nick-named the “Black Prince.” With the PNP party back in power, one would assume that lives of Jamaicans would have improved considerably, but with the global economic recession of the 1990s, compounded by a declining Jamaican economy, one could surmise that the healthcare system upon which all Jamaicans relied, wouldn’t have been sufficient for someone like Grace. Her decision to migrate due to health reasons meant that in the years preceding her migration in 1995, that Grace could not see any improvements in the healthcare system in the near or distant future; in fact she had visited the United States at least three times to receive medical treatment before she migrated.

Grace’s story, discussed in greater detail in the chapter on class reflects the prescient nature of this research project. She, like millions of other immigrant workers stands at the crossroads between healthcare reform and immigration reform, and is a prime example why
these two issues cannot be addressed separately, but must be engaged in the context of their existence and survival in the United States: why and how they came here, the sacrifices made along the way, and the significant cost of being an undocumented immigrant.

2000s

Blessing

In 2003, with her nine year old son Quiet in tow, Blessing came to the United States on a visitor’s visa to spend a few months with her sister in New Jersey. Within three weeks of her arrival Blessing found live-in domestic work through her sister’s connections. She stayed on that job for a few months, but told me that she knew when she left Dominica that she would be here to stay. “Christine, I KNEW from the moment I came here that I was not going back to Dominica to live. What am I going back for? Dominica’s economy is soooo bad, that there was no way I was gonna to stay there, and I had a good life! I had my own business, I had a store and it was a successful store too, I get merchandise from abroad and within THREE days my stock GONE, CLEAR! Everybody buy from me because they know I sell quality things.” I asked Blessing if the decision to migrate permanently was a decision she made on her own or with her husband, Preacher. Blessing said that prior to the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, and the subsequent global economic recession that followed, that life was good and business was booming for both she and her husband.

“Preacher was a successful bodyman! I mean successful, he could fix any car, truck, anyting! When other people couldn’t fix, Preacher could fix it and mek dem car look like brand new. The two ah we ain’t had to work for nobody, we
work for ourselves and did a damn good job too! Then the recession happened and business slowed down, and Preacher didn’t have no cars to fix, plus he hurt his back due to twenty years of doing all dat body work. As a body man it tek a toll, and he couldn’t work anymore. No work, no money coming in, savings dwindling, and my business was slowing down too, so we sit down and had a long talk about it, and we decide it’s better I take Quiet and leave him wid di girls, because my youngest girl was 12 when I had Quiet. Getting pregnant with him was a surprise, because I thought I was done. Anyway when we decided to leave Quiet was 9 at the time. So, I go, and girl from I come to dis country I ain’t neva look back! For what? Ain’t nuthin happenin in Dominica, di economy really bad, it’s ridiculous! Everyting dere is so expensive which is why I send so much barrel. Preacher come and go, and he don’t gimme nothing for Quiet, but I don’t let Quiet know. But is I, sink and float to put those girls through college and I gon sink and float to put this one through school too!”

According to the year 2000 estimates, 23% of Dominica’s population was unemployed, and with a labor force of 25,000, in 2002 30% of its population lived below the poverty line, and the country had GNP or GNI of 1.2%. With such a high unemployment rate, it is easy to understand the economic reasons behind Blessing leaving her young adult daughters behind to migrate with her son. Blessing said that she took several domestic jobs when she arrived and decided that with Quiet being so young that weekday live-in work wasn’t the best situation, so she continued living with her sister, and then after a few years decided to move to Brooklyn because her commute for the weekend live-in job in Long Island was too long and arduous to

and from New Jersey. At the time of my data collection, she had worked for the family in Long Island for approximately six years, and then had another weekday nanny job for a family that lived in Manhattan but moved to Connecticut. The weekend live-in job was lucrative enough for her to save money and send remittances and barrels to Dominica, and her weekday job’s earnings she used to support herself and her son.

At the time of my first interview with Blessing, her son Quiet was fifteen years old, and two years prior they had moved from Brooklyn to the Northeast Bronx for better housing options. Although she found the costs of living higher in the Northeast Bronx, she loved the quietness of the area, and considered it a welcome change from the congestion and noise of Bushwick. As an undocumented working single mother, Blessing was able to send her two daughters to college in Dominica, adding that one is an architect and the other an accountant but with no job prospects in Dominica, her daughters were floundering under the challenges that plague many countries designated as “Third World” or “developing.” They are educated with no opportunities for economic advancement in sight.

Blessing wears her “sink and float” status like a badge of honor. She communicates with her daughters and husband weekly through Skype and via telephone, but the reality of not being present to see her daughters into their early adulthood, Blessing did what she could with what she had, noting: “I struggle and did my best, and if it wasn’t for these jobs, my youngest daughter wouldn’t even KNOW the word architect, much less become one. The oldest manage to get a lil bookkeeping job. It ain’t what she went school for, because she did accounting, but I tell her, someting betta than nothing, because wid Dominica’s economy she just have to bounce until she can do betta.” While writing this chapter, Blessing revealed that her immigration papers finally came through her uncle, who filed for her papers.
“Girl, I going home for two weeks in di summer, I watching what I eating to lose weight so I can look GOOD! I cyan go home looking shabby, I have to show them dat America ain’t kill me, dat I mekking it here. Girl, I cyan wait, it’s been 10 years since I go home, 10 long years...my brother die last year and I couldn’t even go to lay him to rest, but I send money to help wid di funeral...that was hard. At least I can visit his grave and see my mother, she’s still alive and well, thank God. I’m so excited to go!”

I realized that living and working as an undocumented worker, Blessing was forced to deal with many harsh realities. Blessing missed her brother’s funeral, her daughter’s birthdays, and even wedding anniversaries with her husband. One day she told me that they had been married thirty-four years but that they’re anniversary was marked with just a phone call to each other. I gathered that with her husband not working and deciding to join the ministry as a marriage counselor in his local church, that the distance between them must have had a significant impact. While they speak weekly to keep abreast on Quiet’s progress in school and his overall wellbeing, Preacher’s 3-6 month visits every 3-4 years was not sufficient to maintain their marriage. Even as she announced her anniversary to me one day when I visited her, I wished her a happy anniversary; we both knew that with a ten year absence due to her immigration status, and only three visits from Preacher, that their anniversary was truly in name only.

Blessing’s update on her immigration status also reveals the truths that many immigrant women have to hide from themselves and others when telling their stories of home and post-migration experiences. I interviewed Blessing a total of four times, and due to her busy work schedule our meetings were always brief, with Blessing answering questions or filling me in
quickly about her work situation or personal history. During my third interview with her, which took place almost two years after my first interview, it occurred to me that during our first interview Blessing’s immigration papers must have been underway. When I asked her about it the third time we spoke, Blessing said could not be jubilant about the possibility of returning home, telling me, “I don’t tell anybody other than my relative who is filing for me, I keeping it under wraps because God knows what can happen.” I wished her congratulations but Blessing, in a very surreptitious tone, whispered “I not saying anything, I ain’t saying nothing until I have my papers in my hand, until then, mums de word” (sealing her lips with an imaginary zipper).

A critical examination of Blessing’s adamant stance that she was “neva going back dere” and the way she recalled with great pride her decision to choose a more financially stable way of life due to dire the economic circumstances in Dominica, shows the role of performance in maintaining her identity. Her more recent news discloses that she could not afford to show the vulnerable and painful side of her migration narrative. Blessing’s brave front a few years earlier was not informed by the passing of her brother, her mother’s home burning down, celebrations, illnesses and deaths of other relatives, friends, community members who she could not be in attendance to support or mourn. During our most recent conversation, Blessing, told me that her youngest daughter was engaged to be married and expecting a child. Blessing is now an expectant grandmother, who has only spoken to her future son-in-law by phone, she did not have the opportunity to vet her daughter’s prospect like most parents do. When she returns home, she will have to do so many things in her two week stay, along with determining whether her daughter’s partner is an acceptable one. Even though “she grown,” Blessing said she hopes and prays he is a decent man who will treat her daughter right, and says that “won’t be able to determine that, until I meet him myself.”
Blessing’s narrative, like many of my participants divulges an even deeper issue pertaining to identity and the perception of Afro-Caribbean women as strong Black women in the United States, and in the African diaspora. Blessing performed a strong, adamant female Afro-Caribbean identity in recounting her history; in her capacity as a worker, she performs in that same capacity in order to keep her work and ensure that she gets paid on time on a weekly and bi-weekly basis from both jobs. The reality of her uncertain circumstances necessitates a performance on some level, because if she were to allow her employers to take advantage of her and not pay her on time or to withhold Blessing’s pay would mean that the people who rely on Blessing’s salary would also be adversely impacted. For women who are undocumented and supporting multiple households transnationally, not getting paid could have significant consequences in terms of her daughters’ college education and other expenses related to their upkeep.

The strong performances that Blessing shared with me also has another lens that we can use to better understand her circumstances and that has to do with Blessing’s status in Dominica as a former business owner who chose to migrate to the United States. If Blessing had not sacrificed and put on a strong persona she could’ve potentially lost her privileged status because she came to foreign and forgot about her children. Blessing revealed to me that “Chile, Dominica so small, everybody knows everybody, and I can’t do anything in this country that will give me bad name. No! No! No! Elected officials know my mother by first name, even di prime minister eat at her house! I can do nothing to destroy dat.” Blessing is a prime example of the complexities around Weber’s theorization of class and status groups. Blessing’s strong performances are not just about her, but are also about the privileged status that she inherited from her mother’s position in Dominican society. This reality speaks to the multi-layered
challenges that undocumented immigrants must navigate on a daily basis, it also speaks to the multiple class positions that women like Blessing occupy. Even though her job title in New York doesn’t reflect the class and status position she migrated with, she must still perform within that privileged class status as much as possible. Blessing’s performance of a strong identity is very significant to her survival here in New York and her former life in Dominica, the two households she supported over the last ten years depend on it in numerous ways. The constant performance and occupation of multiple identities and a privileged status means that there is very little time to just be. The performance of identities is a common phenomenon that is evident throughout this research project, and will be addressed in relation to some specific dire consequences and risks later in the chapter.

**Distant Mother**

Unlike Blessing, Distant Mother was unable to migrate with her family and had to leave both of her children in Jamaica with her mother. In 2008 when Distant Mother arrived to the United States from Jamaica on a student visa to earn a degree in Biology, technology was instrumental in maintaining the transnational ties between Distant Mother and her two sons. Her ex-husband migrated illegally years prior and did not contribute to the financial or emotional upkeep for their children. Since her father had poor health, and her mother was elderly, the responsibility of doing homework with her children fell on her shoulders, especially after her mother passed away four years after Distant Mother migrated to New York. Distant Mother spent many nights on the phone with her children, sometimes up to three hours helping them with homework via cell phone. Distant Mother said, “it’s really hard, always buying phone card,
and making sure I have enough money to buy phone card to talk to them each night. So even after I come home from work in the evenings, I can’t even rest, I have to call to make sure they eat, if they went to school, wash and iron their uniform, listening to their elders and not being disrespectful. It’s hard.” Essentially, with Distant Mother living in New York, she had to oversee the social reproductive tasks of the household transnationally. These three hour long calls were in addition to her job as a companion and her full course load as a student, paying international tuition rates.

Sociologist Valerie Francisco’s work on Filipina domestics speaks to the enormous lengths domestics go to communicate with their children back in the Philippines. Francisco’s work highlights the communication challenges for transnational families. Her work also exemplifies that for immigrant women working in the service sector, either as domestics or in Distant’s Mother’s case as a companion, the challenge is not just being away from their children and loved ones, but also finding the time at the end or beginning of their long days to maintain valuable family ties through technology.70 The Filipina domestics in Francisco’s research communicate with their families using text messages and web cameras, with the web cameras directed to the living space in their homes in the Philippines. While the presence of the web camera makes family members feel like they are under surveillance, children and spouses recognize that technology enables the family to have an intimate connection to each from across the world. Most of the participants in this study communicate with family members and loved ones via Whats App or Facebook, but primarily use Whats App since it is a free international cell phone messaging service that allows one to record video chats and leave audio messages. Being able to communicate as frequently as one desires is a bonus especially for children who

may want to keep their mothers informed of their daily activities. Keeping line of communication open in transnational families is vital, especially for children who long for the daily interaction with their parents.

While Blessing communicated with her family via Skype, Distant Mother’s sons were practically being raised by themselves in the country in Jamaica, which has extremely limited internet service, but most residents still communicate via cellphone. Her siblings who lived several miles away, had their own families and did not want to take on the responsibility of caring for Distant’s sons, the oldest was a teenager who had a reputation of being unruly and lacking manners. His behavior most likely resulted from resentment about being left behind and wondering when his mother was going to send for him and his brother. Distant Mother said to me, “I never leave any phone call with them and they don’t ask, when I’m going to send for them…All I can say is not right now, but soon…and the teenager always cry and say, ‘but you said that 3 years ago, and all now.’ I don’t know what to tell them because with work and school it’s hard, and the two guys I thought could help me out, turn out to nothing.” It’s amazing that Lady J ended up marrying her husband to get her papers in 1961, and in 2011 at the time of the interview, Distant Mother sought the same option to become documented. After a few failed attempts to find a suitable person to marry, Distant Mother was desperate to get some help out of her situation. Without her papers, technology was the only way to deal with the separation between her and her sons.

Technology is the only way that most of the participants survived under such challenging circumstances. In the twenty-three years since Prayerful migrated compared to when Distant Mother migrated, technology changed immensely, specifically the accessibility and affordability of cell phones. Prayerful lived in Kingston, and had to rely on a phone at a nearby store,
whereas, Distant Mother didn’t need an intermediary and could spend several hours on the phone with her children as opposed to Good Times’ few seconds to say hello. In 2008, when Distant Mother migrated, most Jamaicans had cell phones, with some paying extra to have a U.S. area code on their cell phones to avoid paying long distance charges. What didn’t change in the 23 years between their migrations, were the employment options available for these Afro-Caribbean women to enter the labor market. Both of these women were documented when they arrived to U.S. shores and yet their entrance into the New York labor market was via domestic work. All of the women discussed in this chapter, left the Caribbean and domestic work was the most readily available job opportunity whether Afro-Caribbean women migrated with or without documentation. The remainder of this chapter will provide a brief discussion of the four time periods of the participants’ migration and contextualize immigration reform and healthcare reform with Afro-Caribbean women’s immigrant lives.

You Reach but What Did You Come to?

Since the second half of the twentieth century, migration from the region has been the dominant trend, reflecting population pressure, economic conditions and political circumstances. Some commentators talk of the circulation of Caribbean populations because people are extremely mobile, moving backwards and forwards between job opportunities (frequently overseas) and family responsibilities in the islands. Migration, often temporary, is seen as a strategy for economic survival.71


The 1960s and 1980s were decades of great international and national tumultuousness. Harlem in the 1960s was a site for activism and protest around the Civil Rights Movement as Blacks continued to fight against oppressive inequities resulting from institutional and systemic racism in the North, while their Southern counterparts endured even harsher realities of racism combined with lower wages, and limited access to state and federal resources in their communities. The 1980s was a decade of extreme disparities between Black and Latino communities and white communities. When Prayerful migrated with her four children to be united as a family with her husband, the South Bronx she settled in was trying to recover from severe displacement policies and structural violence instituted with the building of the Cross Bronx Expressway during the three previous decades. The South Bronx was also under siege from the crack epidemic, burned down buildings, and gang violence. These conditions resulted from the lingering effects of 1970s de-industrialization, welfare reform, and Ronald Reagan’s trickle-down economics which failed to place much needed resources into the communities and programs that needed it the most.

Communities of color were dealing with violence, drugs, high crime, poor policing at the beginning of the decade and by the end of the decade, the adverse impact of the Rockefeller Drug Laws, the growth of the prison industrial complex, and the mass incarceration of Black and Latino youth were poor solutions that only benefitted cash strapped upstate economies. Charity, who arrived with her three sons in 1984, found the Bronx to be a far cry from the visions of wealth and grandeur she had imagined prior to migration. Her youngest son at the time was 19, and was so disturbed by his surroundings opted to return to Jamaica. Charity recalled her son coming to her and saying: “Mommy, mi cyan tek dis no more, mi cyan live like this. I need to go home. I had a better life back home, and I can’t see how I can have a good life here. Foreign
is not for me. I need to GO!” Charity said it was “very, very, very hard to let him go. I couldn’t see it then, sending my child back, but he knew himself, and I’m glad I did it. (Sighing heavily)…Looking back, I’m glad I did it because look now, he is the one running all five businesses. Him open another shop since mi gone, and all 3 of his kids went to university. Dat couldn’t happen here! No sah, dis place wudda eat him ALIVE! I’m VERY proud of him.” Charity’s face beamed with pride as she pointed to her son’s picture on her living room wall, and then she showed me portraits of her fifteen grandchildren, noting which ones received high marks on their CXCe’s (Caribbean Examination Council) a standardized exam and prerequisite for applying to college for all children in the English-speaking Caribbean. Underlying Charity’s reflection, is a harsh truth that had her youngest son stayed in New York, she would have lost him to gang violence, drugs, or the prison system. Since incarceration records do not distinguish Blacks via ethnic group, one can logically assume that there were many first and second generation Afro-Caribbean men and women who were criminalized and incarcerated under the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Charity’s decision to send him back to a violent Jamaica meant that she and her son preferred the evil that they knew as opposed to the one they didn’t in the Bronx.

Olywn Blouet’s quote at the beginning of this section highlights the issue of mobility that has always been characteristic of the Caribbean region and its populations. For Prayerful, who migrated during the 1980s, migration occurred as a two-fold process. The first part of the migration process was global and occurred with her husband’s migration from Jamaica to New York. The second part of the migration process happened locally with Prayerful’s migration from the Jamaican countryside to live in Kingston, for better employment opportunities. The last process occurred as a direct result of her husband’s movement throughout the Caribbean diaspora, with global movements informing the local movements. This transnational family
structure was integral to the maintenance of kinship ties and the economic stability of their family, with Prayerful working long hours in a factory to support her family while her husband was away working in New York, saving money to migrate and reunite their family of six.

Migration for the participants who came to the United States during the 2000s was intended to be temporary, with all three women hoping to return to live in their home countries after obtaining some level of economic stability beyond their middle class lifestyles. A more important reason to return to the Caribbean would hopefully occur after the participants also provided their children with opportunities for upliftment through educational advancement in either the United States or in the Caribbean.\(^72\) Blessing, Strong Sacrifice and Distant Mother migrated during the early 2000s. Entering the United States in the 21\(^{st}\) century was a challenge for these women because recessions in the 1990s resulted in economic downturns in the Caribbean and many families both middle and working classes, sought ways to improve their living conditions. Migration to the United States would be difficult, but the nature of the economies of Dominica and Jamaica, meant that these Afro-Caribbean women had reached a ceiling in their middle class and lower middle class statuses, and migration proved to be the best option to assist their families to rise to a higher level.

\(^72\) Carole Boyce Davies refers to this as a generational phenomenon that occurred with her mother and many other Caribbean women who migrated to the U.S. in their 50s. While Distant Mother, Strong Sacrifice, migrated in their 30s and Blessing migrated in her 40s, they fully intended to return to their home countries after they were able to finance their children’s education. Davies in “The Portable Black Self in Community” points to a discussion that she had with Monica Jardine, a Caribbean immigration and women’s studies scholar in which Jardine claims that older women “never planned to settle in the United States permanently but saw their presence as helping advance another generation, while they maintained critical connections at home—church, community, and family relationships and friendships. And this would be consistently so for all kinds of other related experiences. The idea of one’s personal experience being part of history is something that many fail to fully understand.” Caribbean Spaces, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013) 61.
The 20th and 21st century migration narratives outlined thus far speak to the importance of immigration reform and the limitations of Affordable Health Care Act, passed in 2009 and implemented in 2014, as part of President Barack Obama’s healthcare reform initiative to “provide affordable healthcare to millions of Americans.” For Afro-Caribbean women who are undocumented and for the millions of undocumented immigrants are living in the United States, the Affordable Healthcare Act provides healthcare coverage for their children, but not for them as residents and workers who support and maintain the formal economy through their labor that is defined as being part of the informal economy. A further discussion about how health and healthcare has impacted the personal lives of the participants in this study is in the following section.

A Matter of Health

The issues of health and healthcare are key components in the lives of Afro-Caribbean women participants who work in the service sector, particularly those who are undocumented. For women who work long hours performing service work, the added stress produces more risks, as women work multiple double shifts within a three-four day period for both documented and undocumented workers, as well as the dangers associated with having multiple jobs for undocumented workers. All of the women in this study must contend with either the first or second circumstance or both. As previously noted, most of the participants who migrated from the Caribbean entered the New York labor market via the service sector, specifically domestic work. When they began their careers in the New York service sector, practically all of the

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participants did not have any health issues, Grace, was the only exception. Unfortunately, after many years of performing service work, regardless of the sector, the participants said they developed health issues.

Strong Sacrifice suffers from high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and had to have surgery to remove fibroids, in addition to undergoing surgery to remove cysts from her breasts. Sophisticated Palava, also suffers from high blood pressure, and had to have a partial hysterectomy due to her fibroids, Jovial, like Sophisticated Palava had fibroid removal surgery and still struggles with high blood pressure. Charity and Prayerful are both breast cancer survivors who have to maintain healthy diets due to pre-diabetes diagnoses and hypertension. Kind Spirit struggles with high blood pressure and Blessing, struggles with diabetes and has worked diligently to keep off of diabetes medication by using Caribbean herbal remedies when she had no papers. However, now that Blessing has her immigration papers, she takes medication for both diabetes and high cholesterol.

Distant Mother remarked that while she loves her job as a home care attendant, it is stressful. The vast majority of women love their jobs, taking care of children and elderly. Faithful Steward even likened it to “a calling from God.” While it is great to be passionate about one’s occupation, one must ask, at what expense? Leith Mullings’ and Alaka Wali’s research on Black women in Harlem reveals that compounded intersectional stressors of Black women having to deal with earning significantly less money than their white counterparts, fulfilling the social reproductive responsibilities of the household, and being the primary breadwinners and heads of household, means that there is a significant cost just to live as a Black women in New York. While Mullings’ and Wali’s research primarily focused on African Americans women, recent doctoral research from Kyla-Gay Barrett, reveals the psychological toll that Afro-
Caribbean women suffer in the workplace as documented workers.⁷⁴ One can only imagine how those factors increase when female undocumented Afro-Caribbean service workers’ narratives are taken into consideration and studied.

This confluence of immigration status, labor, and healthcare reform, means that for many of these women, they, like millions of other undocumented workers must rely on emergency Medicaid in order to receive appropriate medical care. The stresses of an uncertain immigration status, compounded with long waiting periods on limited days off, means that medical conditions do not get attended to and diseases that were initially diagnosed as mild or borderline now require costly medication.⁷⁵ Very few undocumented immigrants can afford to pay for prescriptions out of pocket, and without their physicians providing samples, joining low-fee or

⁷⁴ Kyla-Gay Barrett’s 2010 dissertation, “Work Experiences of Professional West Indian Immigrant Women in the United States: An Exploratory Study” reveals that professional West Indian immigrant women experience high levels of stress navigating racism in the workplace, lower salaries, and limited opportunities for advancement despite their high qualifications and skills. Barrett’s research demonstrates that regardless of the sector that Afro-Caribbean women work in, that dealing with stress is a daily reality for Black women living and working in the United States.

⁷⁵ Matthew Hull’s Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan, reveals that navigating the bureaucracy in quests for documentation involves the circulation of slips of paper or parchis in order to have meetings with government servants to obtain necessary paperwork and documentation. These exchanges serve to engender power hierarchies around people who carry documents officially and unofficially. Petitions written by official government staff carries a certain level of legitimacy and power compared to the citizens seeking to conduct business. The bureaucracy of Medicaid offices requires that both undocumented and documented Afro-Caribbean women without health insurance are forced to wait several hours to receive even the basic documents that will allow them to receive healthcare. In the case of Medicaid offices in New York, this navigation of hierarchies often involved participants being attended to by civil servants of color, who too often abused their power by requesting unnecessary additional documentation that undocumented women may not have. The irony of these power dynamics is that undocumented participants revealed that they often had to go through civil servants who were markedly less educated than the women were, and in the case of one participant Sophisticated Palava recalled that she “had to deal with a damn idiot who couldn’t even talk properly!” Palava’s frustration may reflect her frustration that her privileged class status in Jamaica was of no assistance to her in seeking emergency Medicaid when she developed a life-threatening health condition and needed surgery.
free prescription programs, using credit cards, or just saving up money to pay for it themselves, they put their lives at risk. Some participants skipped medication that should’ve been taken daily to monitor and control unsafe blood sugar or blood pressure levels, and took them only a few days a week. Prior to the Affordable Health Care Act (AHCA), when Jovial was out of work she relied on relatives who had health insurance and similar medications and dosages to fill old refills on medication they were no longer using, to assist her. Jovial noted one day, “look at it this way, if mi nuh do it so, mi ah go dead, because I feel when my pressure high, and it feels like mi ah go have a stroke. All I can do is pray, that I don’t die, and that my doctor can continue giving me samples…but there’s a limit on that too. With no money coming in, wha mi ah go do? Mi jus haffi bounce it as best as I can, because as I told my doctor who was very upset with me, I cannot do anymore.” Jovial, came to this country documented and is a U.S. citizen, but for the many Afro-Caribbean women who are undocumented, their plight and options can be more dire and require charity from their employers and ingenuity in terms of negotiating payment plans with doctors.

Sophisticated Palava, who like Blessing and Grace, obtained her immigration papers during the course of my fieldwork, expressed that she kept the same doctor for almost ten years.

“Mi dear, from mi meet Dr. Goodheart, I stick with him because he only charges $60 per office visit, and because we get on good, im gimme sample, and he allows me to pay for my bills in installments, especially when I have something that requires a lot of testing. Any doctor that won’t work with me, I leave them right THERE! Yu haffi use yu brain man and learn fi push it, push it til yu can mek it, mek it. That goes for work, and all kinda tings, to be an immigrant an’ survive
Embedded in Sophisticated Palava’s comments are the serious directional and networking skills that undocumented immigrants are required to obtain and navigate in order to survive.\(^{76}\) I surmised that Sophisticated’s approach is not a singular one, geared solely towards her general practitioner, but her insistence on only going to doctors willing to work with her, means that she must also rely on a network of physicians for dentistry, optometry and gynecologic needs who are just as compassionate and flexible as her general practitioner. When I enquired how Palava established her network of physicians, she told me that all of her doctors come via recommendation from friends, former colleagues who migrated from Jamaica, and family members.

Many immigration scholars interrogate the issue of networks solely within the context of obtaining work.\(^{77}\) The limitation of analyzing immigrant networks for employment purposes ignores the myriad ways immigrants live and survive outside of work. This analysis overlooks a more complex engagement of identity among immigrants who see themselves as more than their job title. Inherent in the intricate social structures that Afro-Caribbean women inhabit on a daily basis, are the identities of sibling, parent, partner, community member which require that these women maintain their health for the people who matter most in their lives. Their employment is a means to an end, and is only one aspect of their complicated lives. As Jovial said to me one

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\(^{76}\) These networks by Afro-Caribbean women speak to the complex gendered networking strategies addressed in the first chapter of this project that highlighted Vilna Bashi’s her research on Caribbean immigrants in the UK, Canada, and the U.S.

day, “put it dis way, if yu nuh have di health, yu cyan live. Yu cyan live, yu cyan work. Yu cyan work, yu cyan do nutting. So is better yu have yu health, because without it there is no work to run to, no home to come home to, nothing to buy for anyone. What sense dat mek? Me nah mek nobaddy kill mi wid work, my health comes first. Dem is quite alright ‘til when di doctor see dem. Schewps! (kissing her teeth).”

Jovial’s commentary speaks to a reality that many immigrant women eventually have to face, prioritizing what is most important—one’s health. I don’t know if Jovial came to that realization while she was working or when she became an unemployed healthcare worker, and had time to contemplate how much stress she was under working two jobs (one full-time, and one part-time position) in the healthcare industry as a certified nurse’s aide. Once Jovial became unemployed, she had difficulty getting on Medicaid to get healthcare because Medicaid screeners used her former income to justify denying her application, citing that Jovial “did not meet the income requirement.” Jovial’s reliance on employed family members sharing their medication with her shows that as a U.S. citizen she had to be creative in how she obtained the medication used to regulate her blood pressure. This common, but unfortunate reality speaks to the obstacles that poor and the working poor encounter trying to survive in U.S. society.

When immigration scholars focus on the networks that immigrant utilize to obtain work, they inadvertently elide the existing intricate networks that immigrant women have to navigate to keep their positions and live normal lives. Obtaining work is one obstacle, but having access to a network of physicians across various healthcare fields who are willing to serve immigrant populations through payment plans and free medication samples is an even greater challenge, especially for undocumented workers. With the passage of the AHCA, millions of U.S. citizens gained access to healthcare, but for the millions of undocumented workers, their reliance on
healthcare networks continues. The next section addresses the dire consequences and dangers many Afro-Caribbean immigrant women must face due to the lack of comprehensive immigration reform in the United States.

The Price of Being Here: Afro-Caribbean Women and the Challenges of Immigration

This research attends to many issues in which female Afro-Caribbean service workers happen to be located at the center of the matrices of healthcare reform, immigration reform and the changing labor movement. Afro-Caribbean women are at this precarious crossroads, living their lives, constructing and transforming their identities as they live, work, and travel through various spaces. For all their contributions, women and their stories are left out of broader narratives pertaining to immigration and labor in this country.

Lady J most likely migrated to the United States under the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 and was amended through 1961 which still used a quota system to grant visas based on national origin. For the women who migrated during the 1980s, their entry way into this country was facilitated through the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which eliminated the quota system, in favor of reuniting families and attracting skilled labor to the United States. This act enabled Caribbean and Latin American women to migrate to under employer-sponsored visas to perform domestic work and immigrants to apply for permanent visas to be reunited with family members. Faithful Steward migrated to the United States under an employer-sponsored visa, and with Strong Sacrifice as the exception, all the other women migrated to family. Sophisticated Palava and Distant Mother were the only two to migrate under student visas. Even though they came to advance their education, they had family in New York that they lived with while attending school and working.
For Blessing, Distant Mother, and Strong Sacrifice, the 2001 terror attacks, and the consequent immigration laws that changed as a result, meant that while Blessing and Distant Mother’s entered the United States via visas, one can surmise that the visas were issued under the premise that these women’s stays would be temporary and not permanent. This question of visas is also intimately tied to the issue of socio-economic class. According to Ransford Palmer, “[t]he data indicate that most of the illegal aliens from the English-Speaking Caribbean entered the United States legally with temporary visas. The costs of travel and control over issuing visas suggest that for temporary visitors who travel to the United States for business, pleasure, or for study are likely to come from the middle strata of the sending countries. This makes illegal migration from the Caribbean more of a middle-class than a lower-class phenomenon…”78 As opponents of immigration reform deploy xenophobic language to discuss undocumented immigrants, it is important to note that the archetype of undocumented worker is that of a poor Latin American, crossing borders illegally. Such discourse ignores the complex class structures that exist within immigrant communities, as well as prevents wider discourses as to who is actually here in the United States. These discourses certainly don’t include immigrant Afro-Caribbean men and women and other immigrants from non-Spanish speaking nations.

As immigration reform has gotten tabled in recent years by the failure to pass the Dream Act, and the federal decision on February 2015 to halt immigration reform, the challenges for Afro-Caribbean women become direr because their faces are not the stereotypical Brown faces demonized as parasites invading U.S. borders. On the Whitehouse’s website on immigration reform, President Obama noted that immigration reform was needed so that the engineers and

78 Palmer, In Search of a Better Life, Ibid., 34.
scientists would not be lost to other countries. During his 2008 presidential campaign addressing immigration reform, the Afro-Caribbean women in my research were not mentioned. Afro-Caribbean women, like other immigrant women who work in the U.S. service sector are rarely mentioned in national discourses on immigration. President Obama, like most immigration reform advocates was not interested in ensuring that the female teachers, business owners, office administrators, and factory workers from the English-speaking Caribbean would not be lost to other nations. In their home countries, Caribbean women’s labor has value in both social and economic capital depending on the woman’s class status and position in their local communities and churches. The social capital attributed to many of the Afro-Caribbean participants is highly regarded by virtue of these women not being on the bottom of the socio-economic ladder as members of the poor, or working classes in their respective countries. However, Afro-Caribbean women’s labor in the Caribbean and in the United States is already devalued by U.S. society and U.S. governmental structures upon arrival. While these women support the formal economy by taking care of children, the sick, disabled, and elderly populations of this nation, their labor and presence, while essential to maintenance of the formal economy and its workers, gets pushed to margins of the irrelevancy. On these margins, teeter the significance of their labor, insufficient knowledge of their skills set, and more importantly, the lives of the women who perform said labor.

The labor movement acknowledges the presence of documented female workers of color, but unions and agencies only advocate for those with a legal immigration status that authorizes the women to work in the United States. In an interview with one agency manager, she informed me that her agency only employs documented workers, and only these workers can sign up for

the agencies’ nanny and CPR training sessions which are affiliated with a private New York hospital. This restriction denies undocumented domestics the opportunity to receive professional certification which may or may not mean higher paying jobs working for more affluent employers. This agency’s policy is no different than most healthcare agencies who hire certified nurses’ aides, if the women are undocumented, they may be relegated to the lowest rung positions as home health aides and companions. This lack of documentation may also prevent women from working on the books in hospitals or nursing homes which may pay more than private settings, depending on the wealth of the private client. For the millions of female undocumented service workers, many are left to local advocacy groups to fight on their behalf. Unfortunately, many women work for decades not knowing the names of these organizations and advocacy groups, because they do not fit the stereotypical oppressive archetype that’s often trotted out for press conferences or in the scholarly literature documenting these narratives of oppression.

In this vein, my research attends to the gaps in contemporary research that primarily focus on the conditional aspects of domestic and service sector experiences. These discourses are often absent of the politics of immigration and immigration reform, and thus, do not get contextualized within broader narratives around immigration. This research clearly shows that Afro-Caribbean women are multifaceted and need to be more deeply contextualized in the spaces between. Their lives and experiences are neither clearly situated in the realm of worker, nor immigrant, but are indicative of a reflexive fluidity in which the women are constantly negotiating and contending with past lives, class statuses, and racialized cultural identities that are best explored by researchers outside of the spaces of work and in the public and private spaces where their histories and present realities live.
In the literature on domestic workers, scholars are often pre-occupied with the conditional aspects of domestic work. Scholars tend to emphasize the abusive relationships between employers and employees, mentioning that the obstacles are resultant of the employee’s undocumented immigration status, which many unscrupulous employers take advantage of. While discussing these conditional aspects of these women’s lives at work, the exploitive and abusive interpersonal relationships are often overlooked or mentioned as an aside in one or two sentences. With Congress failing to pass comprehensive immigration reform, domestic violence in the personal relationships between Afro-Caribbean service workers and their partners will continue to grow. Many Afro-Caribbean women ‘have come all dis way’ and often see the abuse, like their employment statuses, as a means to an end.

Speaking to Strong Sacrifice, she told me about a friend of hers that was in the process of obtaining her green card, but not without being severely disfigured:

“Did I tell you about my friend, Makeda? Do you know she had to have her rectum reconstructed three, three, THREE times? Lawd, Jesus, just thinking about it, I wanna cry...(wiping tears). She met this guy and he was an older man, but im BUFF! Suppose you see di muscle dem pon di man? Mi dear, im mussi 50 or 60 odd, and im have a body like a 25 year old. Mi dear, she start dating him, and im gi ar anything she wanted. ANYTHING! Dat man treat ar like gold. There was always something about him though that my spirit neva tek. Mmmumph. She needed her papers, so they got married, and that was IT! You know that man was abusing steroids and every night he used to come home, grunting like an animal desperate for sex, if she sex im five times fi di day it’s not enough. Then he took to raping her, in her butt. Forcing himself on her, til she BLEED! One day he
was going at her butt so hard, that no matter how hard she cry and beg him to stop, he wouldn’t stop...Gosh I want to cry...(sniffling). You know she wouldn’t stop bleeding? Ambulance had to come for her and carry ar go ah hospital. Di mad man, ruptured her anus, she had to have emergency surgery to repair her rectum.”

CAP: Den ah so bad she did need ar papers? Life ah yard was DAT BAD?

Strong Sacrifice: “No but she did shame fi go back home, and fi go back home wid nothing to show...yu know it wudda look ah way...But she go back to im and im promise never to do it again, and beg ar not to leave im. So she go back to im, and of course it happen again. Next time, when she didn’t want to sex him because she wasn’t fully healed, im cuss ar an told her that her hole [vagina] was too big. Can you imagine? Then he put her out in the cold in the snow with no shoes, no clothes, nothing, just her panty and underwear, that’s all. It was like 20 something degrees outside, and she beg a neighbor call me and I went and got her from the neighbors.

Chile she stay married to him for two years and put up with that nonsense. And it was the saaaaamme thing! He beg and cry how much eye water, how im sorry and all go down pon im knees and beg her to stay, and she tek him back because she wanted her papers. She still went back to him, and im wait until the very last moment, when you get the final interview and all he had was to do, was to sign the papers so she can get her greencard...And yu know what dat freaky, crazy, bastard did? In front of di lawyer, immigration official, her family and everyting him rip up
every God Almighty paper, saying he not giving her no papers! Just like that. God only know di tings we put up wid fi get paper inna dis country. It’s sad, mi nah put up wid dem tings dere, no sah! Not me!”

Unfortunately, Makeda did not get her papers, not even under asylum status because she made up stories the previous times she’d gone to the emergency room. Only after she had her rectum repaired for the third time, was partially blind in one eye and deaf in one ear did the emergency room doctors document that she was a victim of domestic violence. Since there were no medical records documenting her abuse, and Makeda had not kept a journal documenting her beatings, she had no record of abuse to provide to immigration authorities to gain documentation through asylum. This issue of documentation for women presents an interesting conundrum, on one hand the women don’t want the authorities to know they are here in the United States while they are trying to obtain documentation through marriage. On the other hand, this issue of documentation and specifically documenting events, particularly for undocumented women who are victims of domestic violence, can mean securing one’s future in the United States; albeit through suffering and enduring oppressive circumstances.

Sophisticated Palava told me that she kept a notebook documenting her friend’s abuse almost fifteen years ago, and her friend was able to furnish that notebook to immigration authorities, because Palava recorded each time her friend fled to Palava’s apartment for safety. Seeing her friend suffer, Palava vowed never to marry for her papers, and Strong Sacrifice swore that she would never put up with an abusive marriage either, but time changes things. I had the conversation with Strong Sacrifice about Makeda’s abusive circumstances a few years prior at the beginning of my data collection. I ran into Strong Sacrifice while writing my dissertation
and was disheartened to learn that the strong woman I wrote about in my chapter on Blackness and inescapable racism, had fallen victim to a similar plight. She married a man for love, hoping that he would “help her” and provide assistance with getting Strong Sacrifices green card. She updated me on her progress, telling me that she too, ended up in an abusive relationship. Her husband was “verbally, mentally, and emotionally abusive.” Strong Sacrifice:

“Christine, mi cyan even doo doo inna peace or private. If he comes and see that I’m in the bathroom with the door locked, him use knife and break the lock to get in. Who yu noh cyan even tek a shit inna private? Who? He answers my cell phone and other than work, I’m not allowed to go anywhere without him. Not even to visit my friend dem...Mi cyan believe mi go tru all weh mi go tru fi live like dis. Mi jus wan bawl! Mi nuh noh how much more mi can tek (sniffling)…it’s really bad, really, really bad. NOOOOO man EVER cuss so much bad word to me YET! Him all threaten mi wid knife, an mi jus haffi pretend an cry like mi scared...Although sometimes I am, but it’s not for the reasons he thinks...I have a VERY bad temper and I KNOW if I go to jail, the hopes of getting my papers, are done, done, done. Mi cyan come dis far fi go back ah yard now...”

CAP: What are you going to do?

Strong Sacrifice: “Mi do mi interview already. I just have to wait a few months fi mi green card then I’m OUTTA DERE! Mi gone! It’s so hard though. Christine yu

80 Christine I can’t even defecate in peace or in private. If he comes and sees that I’m in the bathroom with the door locked, he uses a knife to break the lock. Who do you know can’t even take a shit in private?
81 I can’t believe I’ve gone all that I’ve gone through to live like this. I just want to bawl. I don’t know how much more I can take.
82 He’s threatened me with a knife and I just have to pretend and cry like I’m scared.
see people face pon street but yu don’t know WHAT they are going through. Yu look pon people an ah mask yu ah look pon...that’s all I can do for now. I’m planning for the future, I want to move forward but I just need my papers, God help me! Mi go tru too much and come too far fi nuh get it. Scheewps (kissing her teeth).”

It is clear that Strong Sacrifice has goals and dreams but the prospects of turning back is too much for her to bear. The reality of abuse and physical danger that many Afro-Caribbean women suffer through to obtain their papers is but one of the many challenges they overcome just stay in this country. There are a multitude of challenges that must be overcome in order to survive. Strong Sacrifice wears a mask to hide the abuse and torment she endures at the hand of her husband. Her story made me think about the identities Afro-Caribbean women construct in order to cope with the seemingly untenable situations they’re in. Speaking with Kindness, Prayerful’s youngest daughter, I realized that abuse among undocumented immigrants is quite pervasive and it is not limited to spouses, but also many family members take advantage as well.

Kindness, expressed that she had family members who were taken advantage of by other family members:

“We have a cousin of ours that came up to another cousin of ours, and the cousin who she came to picked her up from the airport. This was a young girl from country who nuh noh nuttin bout nuttin, other than she’s coming up here to try to make a way and a life at 18 or 19. Young. Mi dear, on the way home from the

83 I did my interview already. I just have to wait a few months for my green card then I’m out of there! I’m gone. It’s so hard though. Christine you see people’s face on the street but you don’t know WHAT they are going through. You look on people and it’s a mask you’re looking on.
airport, the cousin mek her know that she owes her about $250, to pay for rent, and the cab ride from the airport. Di girl neva even reach the cousin’s house yet and she claim ALL the money, her parents were able to scrounge up to send her to foreign. It was really bad and unfortunate.”

During the course of my research I heard a similar story from a male participant, Jungle, a married barber. I asked Jungle how long he had been here, and he told me four years. Jungle then told me that he came up with a lot of money, borrowed from friends and family members, and saved funds that relatives sent him.

“Mi come up wid three grand (3K), you noh, mi family and friend dem try fi set mi up fi a few months to survive pon dat, tinkin dat kinda money will hold mi till mi find a work, yu noh? Mi come to a cousin of mine, and she ask me how much money mi have di night mi come up. Mi like ah idiot, tell ar $2700. Ah family, mi tink se mi safe, ah mi auntie daughter, mi first cousin. Yo, she start tell me se mi haffi pay rent, light, cable, food in advance. Off di bat, $900 fi rent, $200, fi light and gas, next ah phone and cable and food...By di time she done, she left mi wid $700, and by weekend she tek all mi money, fi dis, an dat, who need fi borrow how much, an all kinda crosses. Mi did only have $300 to mi name. Thank God, mi modda gi mi enuff sense fi put some aside and nuh tell dem bout it.84

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84 Essentially Jungle migrated with $3,000, those funds came from family and friends who tried to make sure that the money would be sufficient to live on until he found a job. The night he arrived from Jamaica, his cousin asked how much money he had, and like an idiot he told her $2700 because he thought he was safe because she was his first cousin. The cousin then tells Jungle that he has to pay rent, light, cable, and food in advance, and left him with $700, and by the weekend she had taken all his money, claiming that she needed the money for this and that.
Mi de yah two weeks an mi go to a club, and mi meet dis yankee. She did look good, ar body look good, and boom, mi ask if she wan help me, and she se yes. Mi sex ar di night, because mi did haffi mek sure if mi ah go married, she have to have a good hole [vagina] and [it had to be] clean an ting, an see if she ah somebody mi can live wid fi di next 4 or 5 year til mi get straight an get mi papers dem. 85 Di sex was good, mi meet ar people dem to see if she come from good family an have good ways and we married ah few days after that. Yo, when mi see how my family treat ME, mi haffi tek meself outta dat situation de, cyan ah live under dem kinda exploitation de. No sah, not me! Mi prefer dead than live ah foreign so! 86

The gender disparities among undocumented Afro-Caribbean immigrants is truly astonishing. I asked Jungle if his wife required that he pay her for the marriage, and he said no. “She neva charge mi a dime. Mi help pay di bills, an dats it. I tink she did really like mi, so she neva charge mi. Mi noh mi lucky still, because nuff people haffi pay whole heap ah money fi stay inna dis country, an mi Thank God, dat wasn’t me.” Strong Sacrifice would have loved to have landed in those circumstances, but unfortunately for most women who choose to marry for their and that she had to borrow money from him. He only had $300 to his name, and thanked God that he had the good sense to put some aside and didn’t tell his cousin about the $300.00.

85 I was here in New York for two weeks and I went to the club and met this African American woman. She looked good, her body looked good and then I asked if she wanted to help me and she said yes. I had sex with her the same night because I had to make if I was going to be married, she had to have a good vagina, meaning she didn’t have any diseases and her vagina felt good. I also had to see if she was somebody I could live with for the next 4 or 5 years until I got my immigration papers and became documented.

86 The sex was good, I met her family to see if she came from a good family and had good ways and we were married a few days after that. Yo, when I see how my family treated me, I had to take myself out of that situation because I couldn’t live under that kind of exploitive conditions, No, not me! I would prefer to be dead than live in foreign like that.
papers, they wear a mask and pay a great price to stay in this country under constant threat and exploitation. As a man, Jungle is fully knowledgeable that he had an advantage just by virtue of his sex while women like Strong Sacrifice and Kindness’s cousin are at the whim of exploitive partners and family members, by their virtue of being women. Kindness put it best:

“I have many friends who were looking for their papers, and had to get out of some really sticky situations, especially when they met men who wanted to make it about more than the papers. The truth is, if you see these women on the street you don’t know what they’re going through, they wear a mask. Christine, you and I are very fortunate to not know what it is like to be in this country without papers, without security. That will never be our reality. Thankfully, we are educated women, but we have to ask some real tough questions about the masks we as Black women always wear. We can never just BE. We always have to be strong and put on this tough image. Well guess what? If you’re here straight it comes at a cost, if you’re not here straight the cost is even higher. I think we as a people really need to step back and analyze the costs of being so strong all the time, because if you don’t have your papers, that could be your life and it shouldn’t have to be that way. Not that way at all.”

Kindness, cognizant of the luxury she had in migrating to this country legally, is acutely aware that many women do not have the ability to take command of their futures.87 Her comments

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87 Literature on domestic violence in immigrant communities focuses on specific ethnic groups, so there are articles on African women, Latinas from the Dominican Republic, Eastern European women, Central American women, and West Indian women, but there are no comprehensive studies, neither is there comprehensive data outlining the perils of domestic violence among immigrants. Perhaps if there were broader studies, more attention could be paid to a group of
situate illegal immigration alongside the real life consequences of being Black, being a Black woman in the United States, and more specifically, being an Afro-Caribbean women without documentation. Her comments reflect the perils of abuse that many women endure, all of which are in addition to the harsh realities of surviving everyday life. Afro-Caribbean women who are undocumented do not get a mention in national discourses on immigration reform, and although Kindness does not know Strong Sacrifice or her story, Kindness’s comments elucidate a painful reality that Strong Sacrifice “came all dis way” and if she doesn’t withstand and survive her husband’s abuse until she gets her papers, she will die, and not even be counted. Her life will not be reflected in the real consequences of not having comprehensive immigration reform in the United States.

This chapter has outlined the immigration narratives of my participants who migrated from the Caribbean in 1961; the 1980s; 1995 and the 2000s. This chapter, unlike other immigration scholarship on Afro-Caribbeans in New York, is not based on research conducted in the mecca of the Caribbean Diaspora in the United States, Brooklyn, New York. All of the women in this chapter migrated to the Northeast and South Bronx, Manhattan, and New Jersey. Currently, only one participant, Jovial lives in Brooklyn. The other women live in the Northeast Bronx, the South Bronx, or lower Westchester. This chapter reveals the consequences of migration that inform the mosaic of identities and that these Afro-Caribbean women must women who are already vulnerable due to a lack of documentation, and more support mechanisms could be in place for women suffering from abuse. This speaks to the larger issue of immigration reform, because if undocumented women were able to become documented, the could have access to better paying jobs in the service sector and be in positions where they could be more financially stable, and not have to rely on men for their papers, or for financial support. Some useful articles that address domestic violence among immigrant women are: Reina, Lohman, and Maldonado’s “He Said They’d Deport Me”: Factors Influencing Domestic Violence Help Seeking Practices Among Latina Immigrants” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 29 (4), 2013: 593-615; and Menjivar and Salcido’s “Immigrant Women and Domestic Violence: Common Experiences in Different Countries” *Gender & Society*, 16:6; 2002. 898-920.
contend with, but also the new identities they must create in order to survive. All of these women migrated with a purpose to better their lives and those of their loved ones. As they stand at the crossroads of being one of the largest segment of healthcare workers in New York’s healthcare industry, it is imperative, that their stories be discussed within the context of immigration reform, healthcare reform and the labor movement, and not solely placed in the discourses around work. Their immigration narratives reveal that the personal costs, and choices made to migrate extend far beyond obtaining a job. It’s also making sure that they are here to tell their stories, as they fight every day to just be.
Chapter Three

Inescapable Racism: An Introduction to the Entanglements of Race, Blackness and Identity

Ethnographer’s Reflection on Blackness

As an Afro-Caribbean woman born and raised in New York, the reality of race and Blackness were inculcated from a very early age. I had the privilege of being raised with a standard of beauty that actually made me feel less beautiful because I wasn't Black enough. My skin wasn't “Black til it Blue,” so in my father’s eyes his daughters weren't pretty or beautiful because we simply weren't Black enough. I did not know who the Olmecs were but I knew my father's face beamed anticipating the teacher’s response when he instructed me to ask my 7th grade history teacher about the Olmecs (according to my father the Olmec’s were an ancient civilization in Central America whose roots were in Africa). When I asked my teacher Mrs. Gregg who the Olmecs were and the reply was a blank stare, followed by “I'll have to get back to you on that” but the answer never came, my teacher’s silence confirmed my father’s belief that the American public school system was inadequate for Black children and other kids of color because it failed to teach us about the importance of history, our history, and according to him that “was by design!” In his staunch Garveyite Black Nationalist mind, Black consciousness had nothing to do with contesting racist stereotypical pathologies of inadequacies about Blacks, it had to with affirming who you are, knowing who you are, and not letting anybody else define you.
The Introduction to Racism: Innocence Lost

Almost immediately on arrival to the metropolitan area’s vast and strange landscape Caribbean immigrants are immersed into U.S. centric racism that is noticeably different from the racialized encounters they may have had in the Caribbean. These women know it is alien to how they perceive themselves and while these women painfully recalled their first encounters with racism, they know racism’s function and purpose and in the words of my participants, to make them feel: “less-than”; “like you’re nothing”; and physically cringing while saying “it mek mi feel dirty, uggh!” The use of the term “dirty” by Strong Sacrifice, a 38 year old Jamaican brings to mind that at one point there was innocence before she was sullied by U.S. centric racism and its many descendants, that racism is so pervasive and endemic to U.S. society that one cannot escape it. Yet, growing up in Jamaica and living what she constituted as a middle class lifestyle complete with helpers in her home and an assistant/secretary in her office at work, Strong Sacrifice knew of a time and experience when she did not feel “dirty” or sullied by her Blackness, her race. That there was great pride and honor in being Black and Jamaican and despite her mixed background of “having Indian in her,” she claimed Blackness as her identity.88

In an incident when she had migrated to New York in 2001 to take care of her son and had barely been in the United States a few weeks, Strong Sacrifice recalled getting onto a New York City bus only to have an old white woman hurl spit in her face as she stood her before calling Strong Sacrifice a “dirty nigger” among a barrage of profanity. Strong Sacrifice recalled

that she stood in complete shock and felt the dirtiness of this white woman’s spit on her face that she was like a stone. No one had ever spit in her face before much less called her a nigger, and there she was assaulted and sullied in an instant. She said she didn’t even know what the term *nigger* meant, but based on the venom in the old white woman’s voice she knew it wasn’t anything good. Strong Sacrifice said she was transfixed until a loud voice came from the back of the bus, and it was the voice of an older Jamaican lady: “Gal, yu mean fi tell mi yu come from all di way from yard fi mek dis white woman disrespect you?”

The question from the older Jamaican lady was partly a question but also it was a call to arms of sorts, based on her nationality. Meaning there’s no way as a Jamaican that one is supposed to tek dat kind of disrespect, and more importantly to let Strong Sacrifice know that she didn’t travel all dis way from Jamaica to be disrespected. Strong Sacrifice said:

“Christine, just hearing that Jamaican lady say that to me, mi wake up same time, and I did give it to that old white bitch, I give it to her so good! Mek mi stop talk before mi get meself in trouble... That lady was right, (referring to the older Jamaican lady) mi nuh come all di way from yard fi mek white people come walk all over me. Mi nuh know how di Yankee dem do it but mi couldn’t do it. Just remembering it, mi start tremble, an mi blood ah boil...”

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89 Gal, you mean to tell me you came all the way from Jamaica to make this white woman disrespect you?
90 Christine, just hearing that Jamaican lady say that to me, I woke up same time and I did give it to that old white bitch, I gave it to her so good! I need to stop talking before I get myself in trouble... That lady was right, I didn’t come all the way from Jamaica to make white people walk all over me. I don’t know how African Americans do it, but I couldn’t do it. Just remembering it, I start to tremble, and my blood boils.
As I glanced over to Strong Sacrifice my eyes rested on her hands while we sat talking on a bench in the New York Botanical Gardens overlooking the rose garden, Strong Sacrifice’s hands were indeed trembling. I asked her if she felt that racism will ever end, and her reply was wrapped in bitterness and anger: “Racism in America will ALWAYS be around, hmph.” We sat in silence on the bench watching visitors take pictures in the rose garden. Our silence was disturbed by a man pushing an empty stroller while his wife holding their baby followed behind. The baby’s gurgles mixed with the crush of the gravel walkway. It was only with the passing by of this young white couple with their new baby did Strong Sacrifice crack a smile and play with the baby. It was strange for me to discuss so much pain amidst so much beauty. I took the passing by of the young white couple with their new baby as a sign, a reminder of what Strong Sacrifice lost in that moment on the bus, but was recalled with the presence of this child — innocence.

The Multiple Ways of Being Black: Diasporic Blackness, Culture, and the Nation

“Certainly part of being black in America is acknowledging “the struggle,” but there’s got to be more to it than that. Blackness has got to be more than suffering and fighting racism”

“It’s not enough to just be black in your own way. We also have to tell the broader story of blackness to counter the damage inflicted on us by the narrow tale told by others.”

-Baratunde Thurston, How to be Black

Strong Sacrifice’s encounter (and those below) reflect the ways that Afro-Caribbean women embraced their Blackness and Caribbean culture as a way to assert an Afro-Caribbean identity that does not stem solely from an oppositional engagement of Blackness. The Afro-
Caribbean women in this study are not older Pecolas searching for the beauty in who they are in their mothers eyes, for them, their beauty in blackness is a given. These articulations of diasporic Blackness do not serve to provide counter narratives, but serve to affirm and ground these women in their Caribbean histories, in spite of the legacy of colonialism in the Caribbean. An oppositional engagement of Blackness closely follows the discourse surrounding the oppositional gaze. This research project draws from Bell Hook’s engagement of the oppositional gaze, as one that serves to “face the structures of domination” as means of acquiring agency. The oppositional gaze is grounded in a history of oppression that specifically derives from slavery and the efforts by Blacks to defy white supremacist systems of power. Oppositional Blackness is a narrative in which the antagonist is whiteness, white privilege, or the racist power structures that support and reproduce non-white disadvantage. In this context, African descendent people are searching for validation or approval in their assertion of a Black identity to counter negative externally ascribed stereotypes. Sometimes there is no assertion, just the stains of the interaction, and silence which reinforces feelings or realities of inequity, injustice, and disadvantage. Diasporic Blackness can encompass aspects of oppositional Blackness, but it is more nuanced and embodies a complex engagement with the self.

For many Afro-Caribbean women in this study, their Blackness is not in opposition to whiteness, but is more of an internal dialogue with the self which has nothing to do with white people at all, but is born of identities grounded in the Caribbean before their arrival to U.S.

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91 This discussion of Black women searching for approval in their mother’s eyes refers to Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, in which the main character Pecola yearns for the love, attention, doting affection, and approval that her mother graciously gives to her employer’s daughter whom the mother cares for as a domestic. Pecola sees this love and attention and longs to be acknowledged and validated in the same way.

shores. This diasporic engagement of Blackness is grounded in many ways through a gendered Caribbean diasporic consciousness and gendered cultured experiences, in which these women assert their Blackness and the nation to affirm who they are, and to let those around them know the specific kind of Caribbean woman one is dealing with. This also speaks volumes about their histories, cultures, but more importantly the memories held in their island pasts which allow Afro-Caribbean women to articulate their identities. Diasporic Blackness functions in multiple ways: it serves to counter narratives of oppression that often surrounds scholarship on Black women working in service sector positions; it serves to call on the nation and diaspora to assert identities that are grounded in their histories and experiences prior to migration; or it serves to claim Blackness within ethnic communities to put forth a self-created identity. The older Jamaican woman’s call to the nation after Strong Sacrifice is assaulted with spit and the term nigger, serves as a reminder to Strong Sacrifice to remember who she was. That signal of recalling the memory and present reality is an attempt to force Strong Sacrifice to engage her reality as a mother and immigrant, and the many sacrifices she made to come to this country.

The call is also to a gendered diasporic consciousness grounded in the physical journey across the Caribbean and that did not involve traveling all the way from Jamaica, leaving behind a middle-class lifestyle complete with helpers and assistants to be subjected to a white woman’s disrespect. The older Jamaican woman did not know Strong Sacrifice, but she knew that as a Jamaican, Strong Sacrifice comes from a culture and history that is embedded in resistance to slavery, Garveyism, women’s contribution to a strong labor movement, and a vibrant popular culture in which Jamaicans are known to display their culture and nationality in boastful, gregarious ways, moreso than other English-Speaking Caribbean people. That engagement of one’s culture and nationality could be the reason when I told a Barbadian nanny I met in the park
that I was Jamaican, my response was met with a terse “hmmm.” Jamaicans have a reputation in the Caribbean that is both positive and negative among Caribbean people and this diversity is present among Jamaicans themselves. The older Jamaican woman was calling upon the positive aspects of Strong Sacrifice’s Jamaican culture (which they both share) as means to get Strong Sacrifice to stand up for herself.

The ability to call on national cultural characteristics and a gendered diasporic consciousness is evident in defending oneself during an oppositional encounter, but there are times when Afro-Caribbean women shift to diasporic Blackness in their assertions of their individual identities as women, namely Black women. Strong Sacrifice displayed oppositional Blackness; but the performance and embodiment of diasporic Blackness wasn’t in the beating up of the white woman, it was the internal dialogue that the older Jamaican lady was calling Strong Sacrifice to have with herself so that Strong Sacrifice could remember where she came from, why she came to America, and the reason had nothing to do with being disrespected by white people, but to make a better life for herself and more importantly her son. The memories and experiences rooted in home are integral to how immigrant women see themselves in the world, construct and reimagine their identities thereby informing how others perceive and identify them as Afro-Caribbean women.

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93 Jamaicans have a reputation in the Caribbean that is both positive and negative. While most Caribbeans consider Jamaicans to have strong, assertive personalities and along with a strong national pride, those same characteristics are also viewed negatively because many Jamaicans have a superiority complex and are quick to refer to other Caribbean islands as “small islands” even though all of the islands in the Caribbean aside from Haiti/Dominican Republic and Cuba are relatively small. Such assertions often rub Caribbean people who are not from Jamaica the wrong way; thus many Jamaicans tend to be viewed as coarse, crude, boisterous and lacking decorum.
In a discussion with Grace, about the disrespect and abuses that some domestics encounter when they work, we discussed some of the abuse cases surrounding Filipina and other South Asian domestics Grace, remarked: “Sometime I really wonder if it true. You know those Filipinos it’s probably how they were brought up. How they perceive themselves to be. You have to take so and so, if you want to be so, if you want to go so and so.” Grace as a Jamaican in her 50s had a cultural perception of Filipinas as being docile, which may have been based on stereotypes of Asians. Recognizing that Grace was racializing Filipinas I added that a lot of Filipina domestics are like other domestics and come to this country with varied class and educational levels adding that some are educated and migrated with degrees they earned back in the Philippines. During my conversation with Grace I noted that there are cultural differences between all cultures, and I attempted to relate the educational similarities of her pathway to the United States to those of many Filipina domestics despite those cultural differences. Grace would hear none of it. Grace slapped the table with her hand to emphasize her point: “Christine it all comes back to self-esteem. You can be educated and still have low self-esteem. If you have a good self-esteem know who you are, where you’re coming from, do you think people can step over you?” For Grace her roots in Jamaica symbolize a deeper and richer grounding in her identity because of her nationality. Embedded in Grace’s comments is the belief that her Jamaicanness is somehow reflects a higher level of confidence and self-esteem which somehow prevents her from being exploited. Her cultural nationality gives her the ability to conceptualize her consciousness as a Black woman not only in the workplace, but in her daily life and how she sees herself in the world. Her cultural nationality is vehicle through which Grace engages the self.
However it is the coalescence of gender, race, Blackness, cultural nationality that informs identity and the development of consciousness, namely Black consciousness. Borrowing from Joao Costa Vargas’ work on Blacks and solidarity in Los Angeles Vargas notes that: “Black consciousness serves as a necessary and productive source of solidarity and social critique” he also warns of the dangers of an exclusive focus on race which “can obscure how racial identities are inflected by and permeated with other identities, associations, and experiences. No one experiences identity in isolation: race is lived through modalities of class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship.” For the Afro-Caribbean women in this study their Blackness and identity is lived through many modalities and the diasporic Blackness they articulate is lived through their citizenship in the Caribbean. This citizenship affords them the ability to call upon their cultural nationality to express and affirm positive articulations of Blackness, class, gender and culture. It is also affirmed by growing up in countries with majority Black populations and seeing Afro-Caribbeans in all strata of English-speaking Caribbean societies. This phenomenon enables Afro-Caribbeans to see that rising up to the highest level on the socio-economic ladder and in politics is not an exception or African descendent peoples as it is in many Western countries, but in the Anglophone Caribbean, with access to quality education and connections professional and political success can be the norm.

Grace, who migrated due to health issues recently got her green card after 17 years of working as a childcare provider and affectionately recalled being referred to by other nannies as, “the nanny who’s NOT a nanny” said that she was an educator for over 15 years in Jamaica. Grace also held strong views about race and racism, when I asked her if she ever encountered racism in life and on the job when she worked as a childcare provider. Her response was

adamant when she discussed her interactions with employers, noting: “just because you
[employers] see that I’m Black you think you can disrespect me? Oh No! It’s BECAUSE I’m
Black and an EDUCATED Black Jamaican woman why you’re going to RESPECT me!” This
relationship between Blackness, class, culture and nationality in how these Afro-Caribbean
women identify themselves reveals a union that was born from seeds planted in the Caribbean
whose plant continues to give nourishment and support when articulating and asserting
affirmative gendered Afro-Caribbean identities. Grace asserts her race, her class, and the nation
as reasons why she must be accorded a certain level of respect.

Sophisticated Palava, a 56 year old housecleaner from Jamacia, expressed how she had
to assert herself when dealing with one of her employer’s neighbors, whom Sophisticated Palava
claimed was a racist, citing numerous occasions in which the neighbor Mrs. Frank was worried
about minorities moving into the affluent lower Westchester neighborhood. On one occasion,
Mrs. Frank apparently yelled at Sophisticated Palava complaining her employer’s dogs were sick
and that Sophisticated Palava had something to do with the dogs’ vomiting near her property.

“Christine, I pushed my glasses up on my face, lowered my voice, and asked her
‘Excuse me, who do you think you are talking to?’ I told her, ‘let this be the first
AND THE LAST time she ever passes her place with me!’ I dress her down sooo
gooooo!!! She went back and told Georgia my employer who told her that I was
right! I said to her [the neighbor], ‘a lotta time you people see Black people and
think all of us are the same...I am a different Black woman! I am Jamaican and I
have CLASSSSSS! So the next time she addresses me she needs to address me
accordingly, because I am not one of those African American, I am Jamaican and
I don’t put up with nonsense! Christine, mi did wan tell her some bad word yu
see, but I needed to let her know that I don’t tolerate disrespect and what she a gwaan wid a bullshit! She frighten! And I never cuss not one bad word, although I did feel fi drop some claat pon ar [her]! Next time she see me, she said ‘Hi Sophisticated Palava’, I responded sternly with a smile saying ‘Good Morning Mrs. Frank!’ Damn idiot, she can’t even greet people properly, it’s morning, so you say: “Good Morning!” Nah nuh manners! These people have house and tink dem have class, and they have no class at ALL! They think they know Black people, I show dem BLACK PEOPLE! Okaaayyy!”

Sophisticated Palava, like Strong Sacrifice assumed that there is a passiveness among African Americans that either does not exist among Jamaicans or goes against what being Jamaican stands for. In Sophisticated Palava’s response to Mrs. Frank, Palava highlights her Blackness while simultaneously stressing that all Black people are not the same. In doing so, Palava is attending to the reality that differences among Black ethnics are often overlooked by wider-U.S. society. In this regard Palava is no different than Grace because they both stereotype other ethnic groups based on cultural differences.

If we delve deeper into Palava’s responses to the neighbor we see that she uses class, as a means to deploy diasporic Blackness, not only with the way she speaks to Mrs. Frank, but also in her decision to not “drop some claat pon her.”95 On the surface, it appears that her encounter with Mrs. Frank was purely oppositional, but a deeper analysis reveals that Palava performs diasporic Blackness as means to reaffirm who she is while simultaneously drawing attention to her Caribbean upbringing. Palava is cognizant that the use of profanity would indicate that she is Jamaican from a lower class status, so her deliberate use of an appropriate greetings such as

95 Drop some claat, refers to Jamaican curse words.
“Good Morning,” is a move that demonstrates her Jamaican upper middle class background, or what Weber would refer to as indicating that Palava belongs to a privileged class status. Palava is deploying her status while relegating her employer’s white neighbor to nothing more than a classless white person lacking etiquette, despite her zip code. Gina Ulysse’s work on Jamaican information workers also highlights the use of language to signal class status. Carla Freeman’s work on informatics workers in Barbados also addresses the multiple ways through dress and attire that class is performed and used to create identities to claim a higher status than working class Barbadian women occupy. Due her occupation as a domestic Sophisticated Palava may not occupy an upper middle class status in the United States, but she makes sure through language and her conscious decision to not use profanity when addressing her employer’s neighbor that Palava is making her upper middle class status known. The deployment of certain terms enables Jamaican women of higher class backgrounds to distinguish themselves from Jamaican women of lower class statuses. Palava is no longer in Jamaica, but her use of language to distinguish and relegate her employer’s neighbor to a low class status, implies that she had a history of making those distinctions as a teacher in Jamaica, and perhaps before then based on her family’s upper middle class background.

This notion of knowing how to conduct oneself or engage in appropriate behavior as a way of engaging the world is repeated again when I spoke with Faithful Steward, a 60 year old Jamaican who spoke about people being affected by race or by being Black in the U.S. Faithful Steward notes:

“It depends on how they present themselves, and some people just throw up themselves you know what I mean? When you display who you are and live up to a certain standard, they realize that you have to respect this person because of how you’re working. You act a certain way you’re going to be treated a certain way, if you’re going to throw up yourself and carry down yourself then you get treated accordingly. As MLK said if you’re a street sweeper be the best street sweeper you are. I heard of a lay person that did not have any formal education and when it comes to asking him a question on matters of life, on religious matters, her gave the best answer: “How you present yourself that is going to make a difference in how you are treated.” No one has ever really brought the racism crap to me, but I know I’ve been denied certain jobs because of my color, but I just ignore it, I rise above it! My level of maturity and my educational level helped a lot.”

In addition to Faithful Steward deploying respectability politics as a means of engaging race, she only views racism in the context of violent and blatant racism, even though she’s been denied jobs because of her race. Her statement reveals a lack of understanding about the intricacies of racism, and while Faithful has clearly experienced racism, her use of respectability politics prevents her from seeing the nuances of racism. On the other hand, other participants utilize respectability politics and are still consciously aware of racism and its subtleties.

For example, Lady J, a Belizean in her late 60s, went to school at CUNY and earned a degree in education. Her experiences of racism, not only occurred when she arrived, but also in the stigmatized treatment of one of her sons, who in hindsight had developmental issues but received unfair treatment in New York City public schools, that was a direct result of his race.
Not wanting her son to experience any further emotional damage due to the indifference displayed by teachers, she removed him and put him in private school where “he wouldn’t feel that as a black boy he was insignificant.” She admitted that her education at CUNY, taking Writing, Speech, and Black Studies courses during the late 70s and early 80s made her aware of the intricacies of racism. For Lady J, those courses helped her to break out of her shell and allowed her to write and have confidence expressing herself as a woman.

During the course of our three hour interview one spring afternoon, Lady J and I spoke over cups of tea with lemon and honey at her kitchen table in her condo in Lower Westchester. When I asked her how she identified herself, Lady J returned to her Belizean roots and replied: “I’m a Caribbean woman—Totally! Not African American, I’m a Black Caribbean woman.” I then asked Lady J if she always knew she was Black and how did she come to this knowledge she replied: “My father told me I was Black and that meant she was intelligent, beautiful, capable of doing anything,” and when I asked what did that mean to her, Lady J said: “It meant that to me then, as a beautiful Black girl, you were capable of getting a husband and being a wife.” For Lady J, her understanding of Blackness was articulated through gender, and there was a difference with what father told her and her reality as a young Black woman growing up in Belize during the 1940s and 1950s. When I enquired what being Black meant to her now:

“To me there was never a question in my mind of my intelligence, there was never a question of my pride, in fact I’ve been accused on various occasions of being elitist and conservative; I am. Conservative to the point that you must not talk about what the man has done to you, you know that! What are you doing for yourself? I’m conservative to the point as a people, there’s much more we can do for us, for each of us, those of us, who don’t have the opportunity, You know I’m
going to name names, the Puffy, the Beyoncé and all of the people, and my sister and I have these conversations often, where are the schools that can be open for math, science, and nursing, for children, for people of color? I look at the guys who plays sports and makes huge amounts of money and I say to myself, schewps (sucking teeth sound), use some of it for the kids who do not have the place to go afterschool, it’s your responsibility, you know and I um, I have a lot of issues with that, that’s where my conservatism comes in.

Lady J, may not see race through the lens of respectability but she certainly sees race through the lens of Black uplift. She is fully cognizant of the class differences in society and definitely adheres to the notion that the more affluent members of Black society have a social responsibility to help members of the Black community. Lady J is one participant that puts her money and time where her mouth is when it comes to social responsibility, informing me that she often works for free in a South Bronx school, and lets the principal know that he can pay Lady J when the budget permits, because “the kids need me.” Whether this commitment to social responsibility stems from home in Belize, or her age in terms of having a front row to seat to the Civil Rights Movement, she is not the only one who feels socially responsible for Black people, but others take a broader global approach.

Charity, a Jamaican in her 60s recalled being a young child about seven years old when her grandmother talked to her about being a slave in Jamaica. She said in their outings to find herbs and bush in the country her grandmother spoke to Charity in her native African tongue, with the grandmother also giving Charity the charge “to go to Africa and know where she comes from.” As a recently retired maintenance worker for 25 years at private institution in New York City, she saved up money while working and eventually started a school in Gambia. During my
fieldwork Charity was collecting clothing for the village that the school was located in, and saving up money and fundraising to help build a computer lab for the school. Charity’s decision to build a school was based on her third trip to the continent. This trip was part of a missionary trip through her church in which she said she felt like she “was called to help her people”. In subsequent trips, one through the church another through the African beautician who braids Charity’s hair, Charity’s decision to fulfill her grandmother’s charge was achieved through the building of the school. Both she and Lady J articulate a diasporic Blackness that is reminiscent of Pan-African consciousness that is about moving Black people forward as a race. For Lady J, that is articulating a conservatism that deals with uplifting the Black community particularly in the form of education. It is the personal responsibility of wealthier individuals to contribute to the larger group of Blacks in America, and it is an engagement that is initially engaged through the self and then through the collective.

The notion of innocence recurs several times in my interviews with participants. For Lady J it was coming to this country from Belize in 1961 wearing only a jumper and thin white shoes and getting her first introduction to blatant racism in Miami before she even arrived to her final destination in New York. Neither Strong Sacrifice nor Lady J had ever been called a nigger prior to their arrival to the United States, but it is clear they knew what the term nigger meant by the tone and the subsequent implications behind the actions the words that assailed them. One can only imagine the innocence lost being verbally assaulted with a term like nigger within 2 weeks of your arrival, or in the case of Lady J, within hours. This discussion of innocence, internal engagements with the self, respectability politics and class status segues into a discussion of being Black in public spaces, Afro-Caribbean parenting approaches to navigating

98 See footnotes 64 and 65 for Lady J’s narrative documenting her arrival.
99 For an in depth discussion of innocence in the Caribbean women’s literature, see Appendix B.
racism, and discourses around the politics of Black masculinity, police brutality, and the presence of Caribbean community that occurs in barbershops.

**Inescapable Racism: Notes from the Field**

Inescapable racism is not always manifested by the use of terms like nigger, monkey chaser, or the act of sexual violence.\(^{100}\) The racist encounter can also be evident by the language, emotion or venom behind the words that are used to assault Blacks which serves as a method in which the perpetrator brings the Black person into the spotlight. Below is a field note entry from 2012:

“I’ve just left school, rather Hunter, to pick up 3 paltry paychecks and to get my syllabus reproduced for the fall. I walked from one park on 68th street between 2nd and 3rd to another on 60th and York to finally Sutton Place Park. The smattering of brown faces like mine becoming smaller in size [at each location] now down to 2. The park is a small plaza in between a high rise apartment building on the right and a closed section of a gated park area on the left all overlooking the East River. As I climb the steps to enter the small park I see 2 women sitting on a bench with 2 children [one small, cute Black boy looked no more than 3 years old, and a small curly haired white child, clearly still in diapers] playing around them. One woman is light complexioned [whom] I mistook as Latina, taking care of a small white child who looked to be a toddler,

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\(^{100}\) See Appendix B for the Caribbean women’s literary engagements of racist encounters in Paule Marshall’s *Browngirl, Brownstones* and Elizabeth Nunez’s *Beyond the Limbo Silence.*
no more than 2 years old. The dark complexioned woman sitting beside her kept an eye on both children as they played.

There was a young white male in his 20s sitting on a bench adjacent to theirs who left shortly after I arrived. After I sat down on the bench beside his, an older ornery white man who seemed to be in his 70s begins yelling at one of the nannies because he claimed that one of the kids apparently “urinated” on the ground.

Muttering to himself, asking if he lived in a bubble he continued to yell at the nanny. At this point, the woman who I thought was Latina stood up, faced him and yelled back. “When de dogs does piss an’ shit, yu say someting to dem?” The old man replied nastily: “As a matter of fact, I do.” She replied with long sucking of her teeth, “Scheewwwwppps.” Shortly thereafter the man left.

Afterwards when it was just the 5 of us in the park, she came over to me saying, that the dark skinned boy was her nephew and the woman was her sister and they were visiting her. She said she had deliberately waited until the late afternoon to come out because it had been so hot and humid earlier only to “come out an’ meet this white man’s foolishness”.

The woman said in a very thick Caribbean accent, “I bet if is the white boy he wouldn’t say nutting [nothing], but since is the Black boy, he say something. That’s the thing with these people, it’s all about race and you just cyan escape it, no matter how hard you try.”

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101 As I sat there, I could not help but wonder if her sister and nephew could even visit the Barbadian woman inside her employer’s home, or if she had to wait to until it cooled off to have them meet her outside. I also wondered if the Barbadian woman had to wait for her break to go outside. I did not follow them but sat for a few moments absorbing what had just transpired, and by the time I walked down the steps and to the corner of Sutton Place, they were nowhere to be seen as it slowly began to drizzle.
I then asked her where she was from and she said Barbados, I said I’m Jamaican she replied, “hmmmm” and walked back over to her sister. The kids were still running up and down on the grassy area seemingly oblivious to what had transpired between this Caribbean woman and the old white man. When she left she told me to enjoy the cool breeze, which indeed was a welcome break from the humidity. She told me that it was going rain later [and] I thanked her because I didn’t have an umbrella and I wished her a good evening. She said “you do the same.”

Walking from the park it started to rain as I reached 56th Street and 3rd Avenue. A large black SUV with dark black tinted windows was parked on the corner and beside it was a thin white middle aged blond woman with a little white girl. The little girl was urinating on the street in a potty. Apparently the woman had placed a vegetable/fruit bag from the supermarket in the potty for the child to pee in. There was no tissue for the girl to wipe herself [with]. There was a fruit vendor less than 5ft away and a restaurant worker standing outside taking a cigarette break standing about 10ft away.

I couldn’t help it, but a “that’s DISGUSTING!” flew from my mouth and she [the woman] remained nonplussed standing over the child. Who would’ve thought that I would encounter 2 incidences of children urinating in public on the same day?! I looked on in horror as the woman tied up the bag of urine and dropped it into the garbage pail on the corner. I was incredulous because the vehicle they were climbing back into was large enough for the child to use the potty in there, and then I thought, where was the old crotchety white man to comment and berate
this woman? The man dressed as a waiter continued smoking his cigarette and had the same incredulous look I had. What a difference race and ethnicity makes? People walked by but no one commented.

These two observations on the same day reflect the incongruities between how certain racial and ethnic groups are surveilled differently depending on the space and class assumptions at play. The old man in his muttering did not expect the nanny to answer him, which is why he behaved as if he had a right to police the behavior of the Black child and yelled at the nanny. I initially mistook the Barbadian woman to be Latina, and I believe the old white man did the same and yelled at her thinking that if she were Latina that she would not respond to him due to a language barrier. This speaks to the issue of the racialization of domestics which is addressed in greater detail in the labor chapter. The Barbadian woman’s response was also a call for the old white man to be cognizant of his behavior, essentially asking him if he policed and surveilled the actions of dogs too. However, with the amount of dogs in New York City and those living with on the Upper East Side, the likelihood of the old man’s ability or desire to police the behavior of the majority white residents and their pets is extremely small, or nonexistent.

Kristen Day, in her study of 82 college male students found that “the experience and interpretation of being feared (or not feared) in public spaces intersects with men’s construction of race and gender identities, and the ways that men assign racial meanings to public spaces.”102

The old white man’s approach to yelling at the women about the little Black boy, demonstrates his choice to exert his white male privilege as a dominant white masculine presence in the public

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park. The old white man’s behavior would be grounds for any person to feel threatened by his castigation of the Black child, yet somehow his actions and presence as a white male did not go unchallenged by the Barbadian nanny. Her response underscores the reality that perceptions of gender and race are integral to understanding the surveillance of public spaces by whites depending on the presence of Black male bodies; and the nanny’s challenge to the old white man’s surveillance of the Black child, serves to protect the child from being racialized while simultaneously rejecting the imposition of white male privilege in that public space. While the little Black boy was certainly no threat to society or to the park goer by supposedly peeing by a shrub, the old white man’s actions served to mark the little boy to underscore the reality that Black boys in America should not feel comfortable or have a right to play in public spaces.103 This little boy no more than three years old, unconsciously or consciously received the message that he is not welcome in public spaces. This issue of race and surveillance will be explored later in the chapter when I address the role of Blackness and race.

Diasporic Blackness and Nationalism

Arlene Torres and Norman Whitten Jr. in their introduction to *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean* remind us of the important role nationalism plays in the historical construction of Blackness in the Caribbean and how African descendants perceive themselves in the context of the nation and resistance to inequality within the nation. With a lifetime of experiences to begin new lives in New York, it is that sense of nationalism, like class, that takes

103 In light of the Tamir Rice’s death in 2014, this research demonstrates that from an early age, Black male children don’t have the luxury of play, they are also denied innocence through the surveillance of their bodies in public spaces.
the trepidatious journey across the Caribbean Sea, through the Atlantic Ocean with these Afro-Caribbean women. Discourses surrounding nationalism, diasporic Blackness and race are important reminders of the complexity of identity construction and how these women conceptualize themselves. The nationalism expressed by the Jamaican Lady sitting at the back of the bus, is also reflected in novels written by Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy*, Paule Marshall (*Brown Girl Brownstones*) and Elizabeth Nunez (*Beyond the Limbo Silence*) which address female Caribbean immigrant experiences in the U.S. In these depictions we see that not only does nationalism travel but it is also performed in multiple spaces in the diaspora.

Ironically, in the literary context and in the reality of these Afro Caribbean participants, the assertion and performance of nationalism, is usually precipitated by an imposition of a U.S. centric subjectivized understanding of Blackness; an understanding of Blackness that is rooted in the history of U.S. oppression of African Americans. It is a cloak that often drapes Afro-Caribbeans upon arrival to the U.S. and while they must adjust to the realities of race, there is a dissonance and incongruence in the fabric used to blackwash them. While Afro-Caribbeans assert a notion of Blackness that would appear to be from below due to the fact that most Caribbean countries are considered either developing or Third World, the reality is that Caribbean notions of Blackness and African-American notions of Blackness are not the same, but are grounded in two different histories, and histories of experiences.\(^{104}\)

\(^{104}\) The phrase “from below” connotes an inherent positioning of subjectivity and resistance of dominated populations trying to challenge their subjectivized status. The oral histories of female Afro-Caribbean service workers living and working in New York uncover varying (non)oppositional relationships with race, blackness, and feminism that are also not grounded in the historical, social, and political contextualization of these constructs by African-Americans born here. The female Afro-Caribbean participants in my research reveal that their upbringing in predominantly African-descendent Caribbean countries informs their perceptions on the role blackness plays in individual and collective conceptualizations of identity.
Afro-Caribbeans articulate a nationalism that allows them to simultaneously celebrate their origins and reaffirm complex histories of being Black based on the struggles of resistance during slavery to the anti-colonial and independence movements of the 20th century. These articulations of nationalism are not unique to Afro-Caribbeans but are also reflected by Africans who as Black ethnics have their own histories and relationships to colonialism, anti-colonialism and independence movements. Like Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the U.S., African immigrants must also grapple with their own negotiations of externally ascribed identities.105 This negotiation of externally ascribed identities can be extremely challenging and cannot be easily reduced to facile comparisons between Black immigrants to African-Americans. Unfortunately for Black ethnic groups living in the United States, the reality of white supremacy which sustains and buttresses structural and institutional racism guarantees that at some point, racism is something that Black people and other groups of color must contend with. The female Afro-Caribbean women in this study quickly learned to navigate through U.S. society whether they are confronting inescapable racism, or affirming their realities, identities and histories as women in this world.

This entanglement between Blackness and nationalism is further muddled by the ways certain groups associate and engage the concept of race; and it also emphasizes the inescapability of racism. Imani Perry in her theorization of race pushes the ideological approaches to race by Appiah and Gutmann further, notes:

“Race is not simply created; it lives…with it come certain associations found in expressive culture: language, dress, style, and regional affect “associated with” racial groups. Race acquires meaning through and with all of these things. Race is also highly defined by stereotypes, so that, even though an individual may reject or counter the stereotypes that go along with his ascriptive group, his experience is nonetheless shaped by the impact of stereotypes, both positive and negative.”  

If we go back to the Strong Sacrifice’s racist bus encounter, she both in the moment and afterwards can be perceived as aligning and resisting stereotypes of African Americans. The call to arms by the Jamaica lady from the back of the bus, was also a call to nationalism, and embedded in that admonishment was the belief that as a Jamaican, Strong Sacrifice was not supposed to tolerate certain behavior. Strong Sacrifice’s comment of “she doesn’t know how de Yankee dem do it” may imply that in her reading of African Americans she cannot comprehend how African Americans have had to deal with racism on a daily basis. The bitterness in her comments following that encounter asserting that “racism in America will ALWAYS EXIST” demonstrates that her experiences living as an undocumented Jamaican woman who is relegated to perform service work because of her immigration status has revealed that being acclimated to U.S. society also means getting acclimated to the systemic and structural racist confines of U.S. society. At the time of our interview Sacrifice had been in the United States for almost 11 years. Eleven years is more than sufficient time to recognize the permanency of U.S. white supremacist structures and learn that as an Afro-Caribbean woman who is also the mother of a teenage son, that sometimes the best ways to navigate the racist structures of U.S. society is to learn how to survive.

Racism, Blackness and Masculinity

For Afro-Caribbean women who are single mothers, aside from dealing with inescapable racism, they must also contend with racism’s perilous impact on their families. As immigrants, Afro-Caribbean women must address the myriad of cultural differences as both they and their families acclimate to U.S. society and living in a densely populated urban setting like New York City. Due to their post migration circumstances, opportunities to attend to and absorb individual and collective introductions to American society may not be available to them. The sacrifices made in order to migrate, means that obtaining employment is key; as is accepting the dangerous reality that young Black males encounter living in the U.S. This means that mothers must be protective of their sons and their son’s masculinity to ensure their children’s safety in a way that may be completely foreign to their past lives in the Caribbean. Like African American parents, Afro-Caribbeans must take great care to ensure their sons are protected. Afro-Caribbean men and women migrate from gendered spaces in the Caribbean to enter another set of gendered spaces in the United States.

Borrowing from Jacqueline Nassy Brown’s engagement of the concept of gendered diasporas, in terms of the participants in this research, gendering is a process that happens multiple times in a myriad of ways through race, color, culture, sexuality, and class in the Caribbean and then again through negotiating different understandings of Blackness, culture, class, sexuality here in the United States. Both Caribbean men and women have to learn to raise their sons and daughters through a racialized and gendered diasporic lens because of the

ways young men of color are perceived and criminalized. In this vein, the diasporic lens becomes the vehicle through which another dimension of their diasporic consciousness is further developed. Tackling negative representations of immigrants and stereotypes of young Black men, is indicative of the multidimensionality of identities that are constituted within and outside of state policies, which supports Clifford’s view of diasporic consciousness that is “constituted both negatively and positively. It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion”\textsuperscript{108}. The challenge of raising children during a period of rampant racial profiling by members of the New York City Police Department, meant that Afro-Caribbean mothers contended with a level of fear as they struggled to prevent their sons from falling prey to the violence that results when police officers too often act on negative constructions based on stereotypes, instead of seeing them as children first.

Three of the participants had teenage sons at the time of the study and all of them (Strong Sacrifice, Blessing and Distant Mother) expressed a fear for their sons’ survival in New York City. Even Distant Mother, a 35 year old Jamaican, whose teenage and prepubescent sons were in Jamaica cited a fear for her sons’ safety should they migrate the U.S., “there’s the gangs, the streets, the police, there’s just too many ways I can lose them and I don’t want to risk it.” Both Blessing and Sacrifice on several occasions expressed great relief that their sons were likable introverts “always at home on the computer” instead of on the streets left to the whims of gangs and wayward police. Distant Mother was faced with the hard decision of not filing papers to reunite with her two sons living in the Jamaica’s countryside due her fear of not wanting them to “get caught up with gangs, drugs, violence” while Strong Sacrifice spoke of constantly praying for her son’s safety.

Strong Sacrifice told me one day after her son Reserved had returned home late in the night after hanging out with friends and was stopped by the police, who were searching for a robbery suspect. “You noh se im nuh have no cell phone? Christine, suppose dem did kill mi one child? Every day, EVERY DAY mi pray an just ask God to cover him Lord, mek sure mi son reach home safe. If anything happen to im me wudda dead, mi cudn bear it!”

While the conversations around Black male bodies and racial experiences among Afro-Caribbean men and women vary depending on the context, it is clear that as Afro-Caribbean parents, they have to have to same conversations that African Americans have with their sons about how to conduct oneself in public; this was evident with the death of Danroy “D.J.” Henry in 2010.

Henry, 20-year old, second generation Caribbean immigrant and successful college sophomore from suburban Massachusetts was not a criminal and was described as a fun-loving person, A-student, and star athlete. Henry was shot to death while behind the wheel of his car with 3 of his college friends inside the vehicle. There was a commotion inside a Tarrytown bar, and all the customers were asked to leave the area. Henry followed the orders of one police officer who asked him to move his car from the fire lane in front of the bar. Upon following the orders, DJ moved his vehicle then another officer jumped on the hood of DJ’s car shooting DJ through the windshield and while a third officer shot at the car; the second officer claimed that he thought his life was threatened and that Henry was using his vehicle as a weapon and so he

109 “You know he doesn’t have a cell phone? Christine, suppose the police had killed my one child? Every day, Every day, I pray and ask God to cover him Lord, make sure my son reaches home safely. If anything happened to him, I would die, I couldn’t bear it!”
110 [https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/04/07/attorney-closes-case-henry-shooting-police/7Ki12gKKRJIMv280e0XLDO/story.html] [Accessed March 19, 2016]
shot Henry through the windshield. DJ Henry’s death symbolized that no matter where you are, as a Black male even when following police instructions, your life is still at risk.\textsuperscript{111}

Knowing the realities that face young Black males who are law abiding young adults from good homes, Strong Sacrifice’s fear is not one born of paranoia but a necessary hyper-vigilance to make sure her son stays alive during and after encounters with the police. Although DJ Henry was a lovable college student, and most of the bar customers were college aged, the police officer who shot him still maintained that he thought his life was being threatened. Perhaps the officer was profiling DJ based on negative stereotypes of young Black males, we may never know. The officers were not indicted and were subsequently cleared of all charges. This case proves that even if one defies negative stereotypes, young Black males are vulnerable to racialized identities through no fault of their own.

The ability to reject or defy negative stereotypes is a challenge for many people of color living in the United States, and that challenge can also be reinforced by one’s assertion of an identity or identities that accurately reflect the individual and not the perception. Returning to Perry’s notion of an individual either accepting or contesting the stereotypes of his/her ascriptive group, the engagement of race and more importantly Blackness by Afro-Caribbean immigrants offers great insight into the complexities behind ascriptive identities and the inability to escape those identities. W.E.B. DuBois’ concept of the veil and double consciousness in \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} provides a snapshot of the challenges of being Black and American:

\textsuperscript{111}In March 2016 Henry’s family settled with the town of Pleasantville for 6 million dollars. His family still insists that the money does not make up for the loss of their son.\hspace{1em}
“Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty or rightly framing it. All nevertheless flutter around it…How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word. And yet, being a problem is a strange experience,-peculiar even for one who has never been anything else…” 112

For many African Americans, the legacy of slavery and its many descendants means that one’s Blackness always operates in opposition to whiteness or rather to the system of white privilege that is embedded within the institutions and structures that permeate and sustain every aspect of U.S. society. Afro-Caribbean immigrants due to their incorporation into African American communities with whom they co-exist and share spaces, are identified as African Americans by larger society, this is evident whether they arrived documented or not. In Glick-Shiller’s and Fouron’s Georges Woke Up Laughing, the authors employ the concept of racial differentiation to describe Georges experience as Black man living in America having to combat negative stereotypes.

“As a black man, Georges experiences racial differentiation as part of his life in New York. He weaves into his relationships to both Haiti and the United States what he has learned about who does and who doesn’t belong in America. Every time he is stopped by the police on his way home from work late at night because he is perceived to be an intruder in the white neighborhood that surrounds the university where he teaches, Georges learns once again that he is never fully an American. His “Americanness” is modified by his blackness; to be a “black American” is to live a life shaped by negative connotations and stereotypes. While Georges identifies with black American struggles, he cannot say that the United States is his home. Instead he identifies with Haiti as his homeland, not only by celebrating his “roots” but also by maintaining ongoing connections “back home.” 113


This tension between one’s Blackness and one’s “Americanness” and the notion that one doesn’t belong, is evident in the state sanctioned practices of policing policies such as “stop and frisk.” For Afro-Caribbeans, this tension is widened to allot for Blackness, Americanness, and Caribbeanness. During the course of my fieldwork, I learned from discussions with Afro-Caribbeans that racism and Blackness is experienced differently amongst Afro-Caribbean and African American men and women. Being Black and male connotes something entirely different than being Black and female, and because of these diverse experiences of race and gender are attended to differently by Afro-Caribbean male parents simply due to the dire consequences of being Black and male in the United States. This was most evident when I visited three barbershops over the course of two years; a more detailed discussion of the first barbershop is explored in my chapter on class. I initially entered these barbershop spaces as a customer and then quickly realized this was an opportunity to gather ethnographic material from Afro-Caribbean men based on the insightful conversations that took place. In my conversations with barbers and customers in the second barbershop I frequented, I became cognizant that each barbershop has a different culture. In the first barbershop, located on Boston Road there was a culture of hyper-masculinity, sexism, and gendered discourses surrounding social events, parenting, the Caribbean, and local businesses. The second barbershop, located on E. GunHill Road had a hyper-masculine, sexualized culture specifically associated with parties or clubbing, and aside from one barber had a very misogynist and sexist atmosphere. In the third barbershop, located near White Plains Road in The Northeast Bronx, there was a culture of intellectual and public discourse on race, politics, the economy, policing, sports, guns, food, and the Caribbean. My barber, whom I shall refer to as Philosopher, always had a long line of customers waiting to get their hair cut, sometimes waiting in excess of two or three hours.
In the 9 months I visited the shop, I had only seen 2 female customers in addition to myself and there was a beautician who shared the space opposite the barber’s area. During my initial visits I would often find her sitting in front of Philosopher’s chair talking about current events and pop culture. During the last 6 months she was rarely there, and any attempt by other barbers to discuss her absence in my presence was immediately halted by Philosopher. Women were never discussed in any kind of negative or derogatory light in my presence and great attention was paid to the barbers’ sons or little boys who were patrons to ensure that they conducted themselves appropriately in the presence of a “lady”—me. The shop, located a few blocks from the Gun Hill Road subway stop on the #2 line, was tucked away on a side street away from the hustling and vibrant energy of the White Plains Road shopping strip and the noisy rumbling of the overhead 2 train. While the area comprises of mostly Caribbean immigrants from the English-speaking Caribbean and the shop owners along the strip are a mixture of men and women from Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America, Korea, the Middle East, South Asia, and native ethnic whites from The Bronx.

I usually visited the shop on weekdays when the line of customers guaranteed a few hours wait as opposed to several hours on the weekends. As you step up to enter the shop, there is small beautician area on the right that rarely had customers, and to the left were 3 barber chairs in a room no more than 8ft x 14ft. The contemporary styled area where the barbers worked was a tight space in which Philosopher ruled with the most customers, and held control of the remote control with the flat screen television usually tuned to Sports Center, HLN, CNN, or MSNBC. During the summer of 2013, I was privy to discourses around race, Blackness, Black masculinity, and fatherhood specifically directed towards the Trayvon Martin case. Many men would enter the barbershop excited to get a haircut, only to see the line of 6-7 men waiting to get
a haircut and a shave. One mid-morning, I entered the shop with the same excitement but noticed a somber tone among all the men as I greeted everyone. The men’s eyes were transfixed to the television, including Philosopher who would glance up at the trial between the lines on his client’s head holding his clippers. Soon thereafter, this energy was followed by what seemed to be a collective intake and exhale breath of fresh air as the trial went to commercial break, the men engaged in conversation and Philosopher quickly changed to another cable channel to listen to a different trial analyses. This vacillation between emotion filled silences and passionate discussion was present during the entire 3.5 – 4 hours I waited for my haircut.

The men expressed their anger and sorrow that Trayvon Martin’s parents would never be able to see their son anymore. In an exchange during one of the commercial breaks, Philosopher made remarks to the entire shop, I, along with 6 male customers sat in chairs while one customer was standing and listening. Philosopher noted: “Imagine yu send yu child somewhere thinking they’re going to come back, and next ting, dem jus gone, murdered, just like that. Yu tink if it was a white child Zimmerman would get off? How me see this country treat Black people, I don’t have no faith in this justice system. Watch Zimmerman will be exonerated and these people won’t ever, never ever see their child again.” One of the customers, an African American man who looked to be in his late 30s early 40s, responded with a question: “Where is the justice?” to which Philosopher replied “Ah America, cyan expect anything better, especially when it come to Black people.”114

As the afternoon wore on and other male customers began to join the line of waiting clients, another barber, Gentle Giant came in and began to cut the hair of his clients and a few other clients who were tired from waiting on Philosopher. Shortly after Gentle Giant arrived, a

114 It is America, you can’t expect anything better, especially when it comes to Black people
customer with locks entered and waited for a shave from Philosopher. The dreadlocked man whom I’ll refer to as Insight was in his mid to late 20s began recounting stories of how many times he had been stopped and frisked by undercover police in the area just for walking on the street. He recounted a particularly violent encounter in which both he and his friend were body slammed by an overly aggressive undercover cop. Insight said he was cognizant that the cop was an undercover officer by the cop’s hyper-aggressive behavior, which was a tell-tale sign that the undercover officer was indeed working undercover because of the exaggerated thug behavior. Unfortunately, Insight’s friend did not realize they were being attacked by an officer so the friend responded with an even greater level of violence to protect himself. According to Insight, 6 squad cars showed up out of nowhere and they were surrounded by at least 10 officers with guns. Once the friend realized the magnitude of the situation, he released the undercover officer from the choke hold. Insight, recounted that he told the officers that he knew his rights and wanted the badge number of every cop there, at which point he said a uniformed officer replied that they were responding to a description of a robbery suspect who “was a Black male, wearing a hoodie and blue jeans.” The whole store erupted in laughter and disbelief with the men shouting almost in unison, “yeah it’s always a Black male wearing a hoodie and blue jeans, that’s the whole of White Plains Road! Get the fuck outta here!” Philosopher added: “Ain’t it funny how they [police] can never give a specific description in terms of height, skin tone, complexion, weight when they’re harassing you but can provide ALL the specifics once dem shoot you?” The shop responded with a collective “hmph” that felt more like a “ain’t that some shit?”

If Georges Fouron as a university professor is perceived to be an intruder, and Insight and his friend are perceived to be criminals, and Trayvon Martin, and more recently Jordan Davis,
are perceived to be intruding in public spaces to which they belong, then the reality for Black males in America means that upon arrival their presence in public and private spaces is always a presence to be questioned or in the case of the little boy in the park, scrutinized and surveilled. The reality of racism in the U.S. and the perils that face Black males in particular means that white supremacy not only functions in the everyday, outside Black/white dynamics but also through the structural and institutional systems of law enforcement and in the imaginary of some whites who feel the need to hyperscrutinize and police Black male bodies as objects to be feared and/or removed.

One day, I entered the shop and Philosopher was having an animated discussion with frequent male customer Chat Nuff. Chat Nuff and Philosopher were talking about Christopher Dorner, a former Navy Reserve Officer and member of the Los Angeles Police Department, who went on a deadly rampage, and had written a manifesto outlining the circumstances that led to his psychotic break. The television was tuned to CNN, and the few customers in the shop were glued to the screen watching the police search for Dorner. Chat Nuff, a Jamaican man in his late thirties, had deduced the situation to mental illness, remarking, “look de brodda just lose, it, im MAD! Simple as that im just flip the fuck out and lose it! Everyting, bill up, (built up) bill up, bill up, til im just go BOOM!” I sat there having only heard bits and pieces of the story in previous days from family members, friends, and strangers talking about it in the supermarket and listened to Chat Nuff and watched a bit of coverage from CNN before adding my voice to the fray, saying “it’s not that simple.” At that point, Philosopher, eager for a more complex analysis of the situation, stopped lining his client’s head and asked me: “Did you read the manifesto?” I said no, and Philosopher, said:
“I read it. Well, I read most of it, because it was really long, I mean really long, I read, (signaling to me that he considers himself an intelligent man) but I don’t like to read that much, but it was interesting. Dat brodda, mi feel fi im. Mi really feel fi im. Ah injustice, di man ah talk bout. Injustice! Imagine, everywhere yu turn, people ah fight gainst yu, tell lie pon yu, mek yu lose yu job. Just because yu do di right ting. An di saddest part is, is a Spanish girl set yu up, because yu speak di truth. Yo dat brodda did inna a lot a pain, an trust mi, tears almost come ah mi eye, when mi read it, im jus cudn get ah break. Ah Black man, ah fight ‘gainst injustice, an im noh im cyan win. It’s sad, but dis place is so racist, dem nuh need white people fi do dem dirty work, dem get plenty of Spanish and Black people fi screw weself. Dem man ah fight ‘gainst a racist system, im try do di right ting, but because im ah Black man, it don’t work dat way. Maybe if im did secure inna imself, an KNOW se im ah BLACK man, im wudn believe inna di system…but im believe and it screw im right ova.”

I replied that maybe Dorner’s belief had to do with his military service. Philosopher agreed but still insisted that Dorner needed to be secure or grounded in his Blackness. Philosopher’s empathy towards Christopher Dorner is based on Philosopher’s pity for a Black man who actually believed that if you did the right thing, (which apparently for Dorner, was to report the misconduct of a fellow officer) that justice would be on your side. Philosopher’s conclusion that the systemic nature of racism in the United States does not need whites to perform or perpetuate racist or discriminatory acts; Blacks and Latinos become complicit in exacting racist measures against their own people by working within or for the same institutions that perpetuate racial inequity. Philosopher’s belief that if Christopher Dorner was secure within his Blackness and if
he fully understood what it meant to be a Black man in America, then Dorner would intrinsically distrust the system, and therefore would not be brought to insanity, when the system supposedly failed him. Chat Nuff, added that the “LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department), is one of the racist police forces in the nation.” Another customer asked, “worse than the NYPD?” to which Chat Nuff replied: “di LAPD is one ah de WORST, RACIST police force in the United States of America, yu nuh remember di LA riots, Rodney King, all dem Black people dem shoot and kill everyday back inna di 90s?” Chuckling to himself, “the safest Black man is a Black man dat can arm himself, but they don’t want that. Yu see if ah Black man cud protect his family and community di way white people protect fi dem own, nobody cudn stop him because it would equalize everything!” Chat Nuff, proceeded to go into a long conversation recalling the policing practices of the commissioners of big cities since the 1990s until the 2000s, recounting which mayoral administrations from Boston, New York, Chicago, Houston, and Los Angeles supported unfair policing practices. In the midst of his history lesson and me getting my haircut, Chat Nuff complained of back pain and decided to go home.

I sat there suppressing laughter as Philosopher’s blade lined up the back of my overly sensitive head, when he was done, I told Philosopher thank you, then paid and tipped him and left. I walked back to my car, thinking about the gendered discourses that transpired in this Caribbean barbershop. I thought about how racism in the America really jades the way Afro-Caribbean men see themselves, but more importantly how it impacts their perception and reality of what it means to be a Black man living in the United States. I also thought about the ways these men must teach their sons about the complexity of their masculinity and the different hues Black masculinity takes on depending on one’s place in the Caribbean diaspora or in the United States. Based on these discussions in this Bronx barbershop, I saw Afro-Caribbean men not only
as men, but also as fathers, workers, owners, community members who kept abreast of current events and history in order to share their views and experiences through their gendered diasporic lens. As Afro-Caribbean men, their masculinity is constantly being negotiated and analyzed. Black masculinity then functions as a site of continual contestations between what is externally ascribed by society, what is articulated by the self, and the communal or collective efforts by family and loved ones to constantly reshape and reintegrate values that inform positive Black male identities.

In this vein, both Philosopher and Chat Nuff speak to the importance of self-knowledge, and that part of nurturing Black male identities comes with arming oneself with the knowledge that in many ways Afro-Caribbean males are no different from African American males. That being Black and male means to able to maintain one’s sanity in the midst of trying to survive in a predominantly white racist society designed to break them down. Barbershops are historically known as male spaces, where men can commune and talk with each other outside of the presence of women. Based on the discussions that I heard and engaged over a 9-month period, I would also characterize the barbershop as a space for healing, enrichment, and remolding. Following Stuart Hall, these conversations exemplify that Afro-Caribbean identities can be constituted positively in the midst of discussions about how they are constituted negatively. Barbershop spaces much the like the music genre of hip-hop is where the binaries of African-Americans vs. Afro-Caribbeans do hold water, because the barbershop is a space where Black ethnics and other ethnic groups meet to provide spaces of intimacy and opportunities for discourse. In these spaces one’s class does not make a difference, the illusion of Caribbean exceptionalism and supposed African American downward mobility does not reflect the realities of racism dealt to Black men by U.S. society. What is reflected are the multiple discourses around daily life,
politics, pop culture, relationships, etc. Discourses can also occur around the challenges of navigating racist structural policies, social inequities, and gendered racialized experiences.

Historian Quincy T. Mills in his study of Black barbershops in the South invites us to think of “barber shops as public spaces in the black public sphere.” Citing Melissa Harris-Lacewell, Mills notes, “[b]arbershops are the archetype of the black public space, consisting of a relatively permanent physical space, but with constantly changing membership.” The customers in Philosopher’s barbershop are attuned to the culture of that barbershop in which as a public space, not only do Black men and boys belong, but their opinions especially regarding race are valued, validated, and engaged in ways that rarely occur in other public spaces. Creating a space of belonging is not unique to Black public spaces like barbershops, but what is unique and not often seen in mainstream media are the ways that Black men create intimate spaces and community in public spaces regardless of class position. Mills also states:

“While barbers engage in cultural production in their work, black men sit around the shop talking, reading, or playing games…It is a place where authority shifts based on the conversation; where everyone gets challenged to authenticate their sources or tall tales; where community is developed around the shop’s permanency and the barber’s skill and trustworthiness. In the typical shop, men of various class standings gather together in what seems to be a democratic space, albeit a homosocial one.”

Mills is speaking about a space that is democratic in nature; when contextualizing Mills description of the barbershop with the preceding discussion of race, it is quite ironic that the barbershop provides a democratic space for Black men and Black boys who are rarely afforded

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116 Ibid.
the benefits of democracy in U.S. society because of their race and gender. Men like Philosopher cut hair, shave beards, and line heads; depending on the day and what’s going on the news, these Afro-Caribbean men are also shaping discourses of what it means to be a Black male from an Afro-Caribbean perspective; showing that like Black people, male Afro-Caribbean perspectives are multidimensional too.

The preceding discussions of race, racism, Blackness, masculinity and public space involved both oppositional Blackness and internal engagements of the self through diasporic Blackness, and the challenges of negotiating racism for Afro-Caribbeans in the United States. This chapter addressed the multiple ways of being Black for Afro-Caribbean women and how the diasporic Blackness that is expressed via nationalism and can also impact the articulation of gendered Afro-Caribbean identities. It is clear that this research reveals a nuanced understanding of Blackness and race and that these perceptions vary with each person. What my research reveals is for all of their efforts, the inability to escape racism and racialization has not been achieved, and if we are to follow the charge of Charity and Lady J, and the advice of Philosopher, one must navigate the myriad of issues that plague African descendent people both here and abroad, and that journey begins with oneself.
Chapter Four

Class Travels and Traveling to Class: Exploring the Complexities of Class, Gender Politics and Identity among Afro-Caribbean Women in NYC

How Class Travels: How Afro-Caribbean Women Identify Themselves

Too often the issue of class among service sector workers is relegated to the shop floor, factory, or workplace as if the environment in which service workers perform labor for a living is permanently tied to how workers are seen and how they identify themselves.\(^{117}\) For the Afro-Caribbean women in my research, the subject of class is more complex than job titles, class also refers to one’s status in her community, one’s mindset or consciousness in relation to having proper manners and good home training, and it is just one of the various ways Afro-Caribbean women identify themselves. In the context of the United States there is a preoccupation by larger society to what one does for a living and the need to classify individuals within a socio-economic categorization of class. For many Afro-Caribbean women the performance of labor is just one aspect of their lives and serves as a means to an end while women perform as domestics (nannies, housecleaners), certified nurse’s aides, home health aides, companions, restaurant workers, or maintenance workers to provide for their families in the United States and in the Caribbean.

Conversely, the performance of these various occupations in the service sector does not define these women, and many of the participants choose to utilize their occupations as a means

of economic survival but also as an opportunity to affirm identities grounded in home countries. Some Afro-Caribbean women and their partners also perform or create new identities, thereby affirming their place as women in the Caribbean diaspora and the world. Transformation of oneself is not contingent on travel, but for the Afro-Caribbean women who made huge sacrifices to migrate to the United States, one’s class is one of the many identities and constructs they carry to come all dis way.

One participant, Grace, a Jamaican in her 50s, recalled that when she worked as a nanny for a family on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, she was always referred to as the “nanny who was not a nanny” by other women who performed childcare and domestic work for a living. Grace told me her reply to anyone who referenced her as the “nanny who was not a nanny” was: “THAT’s RIGHT! I had a good career in Jamaica, I am an EDUCATOR and ADMINISTRATOR, and don’t you forget it!” She ended her reflection with a self-satisfied chuckle as we sat in her apartment one summer afternoon. Grace’s use of the term “career” emphasizes an important distinction in how many Afro-Caribbean women identify the childcare work they perform for a living. The childcare work performed here in New York is “a work” or “a job” but their occupations in the Caribbean were designated as careers, especially for the women who obtained post-secondary degrees in the Caribbean.

For Grace, her identity was tied to her family’s elite class status, and her upper middle-class status she had as a primary school teacher and administrator in Jamaica for over 15 years—not the labor she performed for almost 20 years as a domestic while she lived in the United States. In Jamaica, Grace’s class status has value that is widely respected, recognized, and acknowledged, but in the United States, teachers and educators do not hold the same esteem especially with yearly reports about the underperformance of American school children.
compared to other children globally. Additionally, Grace’s self-perception in terms of how she envisions herself and the significant value of her class position in Jamaica prior to migration prevents Grace from attaching herself to a job title or class status that has no value.

Contextualizing Grace’s background with Weber’s theoretical approach to status, Grace occupies a privileged status honor in Jamaica, in turn, Grace traveled with her respectability and the value of her privileged status honor when she migrated.

Wanting further clarification about what being an educator or teacher meant for someone like Grace, I decided to ask one of my aunts, Distinguished, a recent retiree and a former head teacher in Jamaica during the 1980s who chose to not enter the teaching profession as a career after she migrated to New York. Her reply was simple, but speaks to complex cultural nuances between class, occupation, gender, religion and values in the Caribbean: “Christine you have to remember that back then in Jamaica, it was commonly known that “everybody comes from a teacher.” This was not about money, it had nothing to do with your salary. When you said you were a teacher, you were someone of distinction. You ah say ONE!” My aunt further explained that a teacher during the 1980s was expected to give a sermon in church on Sunday, emphasizing the complex and close relationship between the church and the community.

“A teacher could be called to give a sermon one Sunday a month, and you had to be prepared to give that sermon, or to give a prayer of confession. Especially if you were a head teacher, you always had to be prepared. This was no joke, ah serious ting dis! You held a distinguished position in the community, and back then a teacher didn’t marry just any and anybody. Typically, teachers were married to barristers, accountants, soldiers in the army—a high ranking one at
that! No unmarried, pregnant teacher could be in a classroom. Noooo waaayyy!

No Sah!’”

My aunt’s explanation provided great insight to analyzing my participant’s interviews, but it also revealed a lot about the socio-cultural values and gender norms that existed in Jamaica during the 1980s, which informed someone like Grace, who was not only an educator and administrator but also came from an upper middle class or elite family that had significant social and political influence at the time. Grace could assert a certain level of confidence and authority over her identity because for over 15 years, her position meant something, not only to her, but to her community, and to the Jamaican nation, because of the value placed on education there. If education is considered the means to upward mobility and achievement especially in former colonized nations, then a teacher is held in high esteem as one who aids in a child’s development and is instrumental in facilitating a student’s mobility. In this case, Grace was not confined by her occupation in the Caribbean, but carried her distinctive status with her when she migrated, and it is one aspect of her identity that she would not allow to be diminished by the circumstances of her employment or immigration status at the time. Her approach towards her employment is epitomized in the phrase “a means to an end” because Grace did not get bogged down by the jobs she had to perform, but instead focused on the reasons she migrated in the first place.

Grace migrated to New York in the early 1990s due to health reasons because she had a pre-existing medical condition which required frequent travel to the United States to receive treatment for prior to migrating. She realized that her health issues would be better attended to if she lived in the United States and had regular access to more advanced treatment protocols. Sacrificing her home, career, and lifestyle in Jamaica, Grace migrated and entered the labor
market by performing domestic work. After several years working for different families as a “nanny”, she spent almost 8 years in her last position where she worked on the Upper Westside of Manhattan for an affluent family in which the husband was a political strategist for a political campaign. Grace told me that she had her own wing in her employer’s penthouse apartment and frequently traveled with them throughout the contiguous U.S. Grace received her papers after living and working almost 20 years in U.S., by her sister filing for her because Grace didn’t want to be subjected to abuse with a paid marriage for papers. Grace’s refusal of a paid marriage agreement also speaks volumes about how she sees herself as a woman, and the values she took with her when she migrated from Jamaica.

Intrinsic to Grace’s identity was the desire to not be exploited by a man to secure her immigration papers. When I asked Grace why she didn’t get married for her papers, she replied:

“NO, NO, NO, not me. For What? Wait a second, my sister and are quite intelligent, and we can both read and follow instructions. We didn’t even use an attorney, because they like to steal people’s money. It takes longer because that is the last category or status, but we made it through, and I didn’t need any man to do it! Putting up with abuse and exploitation when it’s supposed to be just business, [and] then sex and kids get involved and all that nonsense. I hear the stories. No, not ME! You mus be crazy.”

In the 17 years she worked as a nanny, Grace said she never identified herself as a nanny, but always by her previous occupation in Jamaica as an educator. Her decision to not be identified as a nanny, also goes against past and current research on Caribbean domestics and childcare providers, which assumes that the identity of “nanny,” “domestic,” and/or “childcare provider” is
given and always accepted by Caribbean women. These treatments do not take into account or fully appreciate how and why the women who perform this kind of service work for a living want to be identified as women and/or workers; and more importantly why they would choose to identify themselves otherwise.

In over 2 ½ years fieldwork, I never met one “nanny” who referred to herself as such, and a great indicator of this class distinction was the pregnant pause that preceded the replies of the women who worked as nannies when I asked them what they did for a living. The pauses were often followed by the phrases: “I take care of kids…” or “I watch kids you know? It’s only for a time though…” The pauses before and after their replies, became prime opportunities to ask the participants what they did for a living in the Caribbean, at which point if their voices changed in both pitch and tone in elevated responses, I knew that they truly loved what they did, and it wasn’t a romanticized reflection, but they spoke with a level of passion anyone could tell they were invested in who they were as professionals and in what they did. There was a distinct shift in their body language too, most women sat up straighter and squared their shoulders to emphasize their former career roles, recalling their former lives and the women they could have been had they not migrated. Their privileged status honor was not a performance but it was reflected who they really were.

The fact that these women were born in the Caribbean, had full lives prior to migration and then must perform service work to survive and maintain households in the United States and the Caribbean, speaks volumes about their journey as Afro-Caribbean women across the Caribbean sea and the values and constructs they brought with them. These experiences cannot

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be simply construed as baggage—items that can be left behind at the onset of one’s journey, pushed aside, or packed away on arrival. These identities and experiences take on new meaning and therefore must be examined in all their complexities, much like the women who carry them and continue to sacrifice and work hard to excel beyond the career titles and statuses they left behind in the Caribbean. Their identities, values and constructs are integral to the formation, transformation, and articulation of identities that inform who these Afro-Caribbean women were, are, and who they wish to become.

The ability to recall one’s status is something that many female Afro-Caribbean service workers do, particularly during hostile interactions with employers. The vast majority of the literature on domestic work focuses on the conditional aspects of domestic work, with scholars portraying the oppressive conditions that many domestics have to contend with.\(^{119}\) Emphasis on the conditional aspects of domestic work, often posits the women who perform domestic work solely as victims, or one dimensional individuals, not taking into account the multidimensional aspects of the women’s lives. My research found that while some women may have had negative experiences, those negative experiences became opportunities or sites for recalling, asserting, and reaffirming who they are. Recalling one’s true identity also highlights the role of the performance of domestic and service work, and the incongruence with past roles Afro-Caribbean women occupied in their careers or lives back home. Sophisticated Palava noted that she selectively revealed her educational background to employers and potential employers when she worked as a housecleaner and domestic for multiple employers at the same time. “No, no,

no, no, you don’t need to know what I did for a living, that’s my business. Now when you fas wid me, that’s when I’m going to TELL and SHOW you who I AM, as I put yu in yu place!”

Similarly, Jovial, a Jamaican who worked at a hospital for almost 15 years as a certified nurse’s aide, recalled a hostile encounter with an employer whom she performed domestic work for when she just arrived to New York. Jovial deliberately kept her upper-middle class background in Jamaica from her employer until they got into an argument over her wages. Jovial felt the employer wasn’t paying her adequately or on time, and she recalled telling the employer: “Jennifer, people nuh better than people, but di best fi yu, ah di worst fi me! Look how old you are before you cudda buy a nice house and nice furnishings. In my home in Jamaica, I grew up with furniture even better dan this mek with REAL mahogany, from me a baby and you ah 40-odd and it jus ah come! Gway from me, nuh bodda tink seh yu can tek step ah me! Mi ah nuh pyah pyah smbadddy!” Jovial said shortly after this argument she left and found a better paying job. Like Grace and Sophisticated Palava, Jovial’s occupation as a domestic did not erase her upper-middle class background in Jamaica, and the mere fact that she waited to let her employer know about her class status means she had the ability to perform class, and when it suited her, present the reality of her class. These three women epitomize an internal engagement that women have with themselves. Keeping past class statuses and family backgrounds to themselves and performing otherwise, means that their histories and backgrounds

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120 No, no, no, no, you don’t need to know what I did for a living, that’s my business. Now when you mess with me, that’s when I’m going to TELL and SHOW you who I AM, as I put you in your place!”

121 Jennifer, people aren’t better than people, but the best for you, is the worst for me! Look how old you are before you could afford to buy a nice house with nice furnishings. In my home in Jamaica, I grew up with furniture even better than this that was made with REAL mahogany, from I as was a child and you are 40-odd years old and you’re just getting these things. Go away from me, and don’t bother to think that you can take advantage of me. I’m not a poor or insignificant person!
are sacred to them as women, and must be kept to themselves as a means of practicality, self-preservation, or as reminders of who they were, and more importantly who they are and why they made the sacrifice to migrate.

Unlike Jovial, Charity was not prepared to subjugate herself to performing outside of her class position. Charity, a recently retired maintenance worker, arrived in New York City in 1984. Charity was a business owner when she decided to migrate due to the violent political climate in Jamaica at the time and had her own set of expectations of what could be attained by living in the United States. I met Charity on a weekday on the train as I headed downtown to teach in Manhattan, she was traveling with her church brother and needed directions to an address in the city. After I looked up the directions on my phone, we struck up a conversation and I asked her if she’d be willing to be interviewed and she said “of course, anything to help my Black people my dear, my granddaughter is getting her Phd in Biology so I know the struggle.” I called Charity a few days later and met her that afternoon in her home to talk. Based on our conversation on the train, I decided that in my interview with Charity I wanted to ascertain the differences in her class position in Jamaica, what she expected when she arrived, and the post-migration reality of adjusting to a different or lower class position.

CAP: What kind of employment options did you have in terms of work when you came?

Charity: O.K. When I came here because of not having any education, my husband asked a friend to take me to an agency to see if I could get something to do. So I had no objection, so this girl tek mi to White Plains, and tek mi to dis agency and they interview me and the first thing di woman [asked] me, do I know how to use a washing machine, dishwasher, blender? I said sure. Then she said the job she have, di woman have 5 kids, 8 bedrooms, 7 days a week, I’ll get a day off like
maybe once every 2 month, and it was a Jewish family. And I sat in the chair, and I listen carefully to every word, and when she finish, I said: “Send to Israel and get some of those Jews there!” And I slammed the door and said to my friend “let’s go, di plane leave from New York to Jamaica 3, 4 times a day, I’ll be on the next flight out, I’m NOT one of those slave!” Just like that! I was quarreling and mad, coming back down [from White Plains] and my [friend] said to me, “wha happen Charity? Wha happen?” I said “Are you serious? Yu never hear what she said to me?” [My friend replied] “Oh, you got to start somewhere.” I said I am not one of those people that didn’t have something I’m going back to a meat store, bakery, grocery store, and a restaurant. I know good life.”

Charity did not return home to Jamaica, but got a job making jewelry in Manhattan, and negotiated her pay from $2.50/hour to $10.00/hour after 3 years. During those three years, Charity says for extra money she also took on days work cleaning houses on her days off and was a companion at night for elderly patients. When I asked how many positions she held as a domestic and aide during those early years, she told me at least 10 but she only worked for a fair wage, “because I wasn’t gonna work and dem nuh pay me.” Charity’s knowledge and experience of a “good life” disrupts stereotypical narratives about immigrants from “developing” or “undeveloped” countries who migrated from impoverished means in search of better lives. Charity’s narrative also elucidates the significant value she placed on herself despite not having a formal education. Charity regarded herself as being above the slave labor the employment agency was proposing, but also Charity perceives herself with the privileged status she held as a business owner in Jamaica, not the work she’s relegated to perform to survive and support her
family in New York. The issue of class as social status and as something that is performed and lived daily is very different from traditional political economic approaches to class in terms of hierarchies. I quickly learned during fieldwork that the performance of class isn’t just relegated to Afro-Caribbean women but to the men who share their lives.

**Performing Class: Discourses on the Politics of Class, Gender and Sexuality in the Barbershop**

You'd be surprised to know how much information one can obtain when not focused on sites where Afro-Caribbean women work, but looking in the places where they and their loved ones live. For 2 years of my data collection, I wore my hair in a low-Caesar style which meant that it was cut very low to the scalp, with only the sides and back of my head lined up. This style required regular maintenance, and because my hair grew quickly I chose to have my hair cut every two weeks to maintain a sharp and polished look. I discuss the aesthetics behind my haircut descriptions because in the Caribbean community that I live in The Bronx, most Caribbean men assume that my style of haircut reflects a particular sexual orientation— that of a lesbian. I frequented three barbershops and visited the second barbershop the longest and was a client of one of the barbers, Jungle for over a year. I had cut off my dreadlocks for religious reasons and was unhappy with my barber, Polite at the first shop I visited due to his reluctance to cut my hair in my preferred low-Cesar style. Polite would often refuse to cut my hair any shorter for his fear that men may think I’m a lesbian. It was clear that he cared more about people’s perceptions of my sexual orientation than I did, but this reluctance went further than haircuts, it had to do with Caribbean gender and sexuality politics and more.

There is a broader discussion on Caribbean sexuality and aesthetics operating behind my attempts to get a haircut and collect ethnographic data. Polite behaved as many Afro-Caribbean
men do—with an expectation that women and their style and appearance is for the sole pleasure of men. Embedded in Polite’s reluctance to cut my hair to my desire, is a belief that women are objects, and a man’s desire towards a woman’s body supersedes a woman’s desire for herself, but more importantly, supersedes the right for a woman to have opinions about herself that don’t require input from men. Polite’s gender politics is articulated through the erasure of women, their thoughts, and their ideas about who they are. I defied those gender norms and refused to continue getting haircuts that I didn’t like just so I could either please men or get a man. I realized that instead of respecting me as a paying customer, Polite chose to prioritize his antiquated gender politics over business. In so doing, his attempts to force me to conform to his standards were met with great resistance.

I also recognized that Polite engaged women whom he liked forcefully and expected to get his way, simply because he was a man. As a headstrong Afro-Caribbean woman, I supposedly had no right to establish boundaries over my body, and Polite believed I would continue to patronize him even though I was unhappy with his work. After three extremely disappointing haircuts, I told Polite that I refused to pay money and be dissatisfied. It’s one thing to be unhappy with a free cut, it’s another to pay for a cut I didn’t like despite guiding the barber on how I like my hair cut and then be forced to listen to the most sexually violent dancehall and misogynistic conversations of the other barbers. Polite’s cuts were not as edgy and sharp as I would’ve like and in search of a new barber, and a barbershop with a different culture, I visited the second shop, based on my brother’s recommendation.

This barbershop, located in the Northeast section of the Bronx, off a main thoroughfare, Boston Post Road, is a barbershop with a beauty salon area located in the back of the barbershop for women to get their hair pressed, permed, or cut by the beautician. The barbershop’s clientele
comprised mostly of men, with a few female customers. The few I did see on a biweekly basis did not request haircuts as close to the scalp as I did, and most of them were older women who received cuts from the owner, Selector, who cut hair in a very masculine, old-fashioned style reminiscent of the 1990s. There were a few younger women in their 20s and 30s, who patronized another barber, Conscious to get their hair lines lined up after they got a perm elsewhere or from the shop’s beautician. After a few visits, some of the shop’s seven barbers would ask if I’m married and have children, and when I replied “No” to both inquiries and engaged in casual conversation, they proved their assumptions wrong. It was at that point that I— a sports-loving, single, Afro-Caribbean woman became both a customer and an object of conquest.

Instead of being reserved and quiet like most female customers in this male dominated barbershop, I behaved like other male customers, and my outspokenness and contributions to animated discussions defied typical female etiquette in barbershops. Barbershops are notorious for being the domain of men, and beauty salons the domain of women, so my position as an Afro-Caribbean woman in a barbershop who was seen and heard was a contradiction to how many of these men interacted with women in their private lives. My insertions of sports analyses into arguments meant that I had entered the domain of men, and I didn’t ask to be invited, I entered this realm unabashedly and succinctly dismissed sports analyses that I determined to be weak or ill informed. My opinions often reflected that I knew more about sports than the barbers did and this familiarity with my presence as a female in this barbershop lead many men to make further inquiries to determine if I was a good prospect for them to sleep with. For single women of my age, Caribbean sexual politics are always in motion and are constantly being tested by Caribbean men, especially Jamaican men, many of whom view a woman’s sexuality and her
gender politics as a site for which they can negotiate how they as men can engage women to a man’s advantage and not to a woman’s.

Once Caribbean (usually Jamaican) men became familiar with me in places like barbershops or other commercial establishments the common questions were: “wha kinda work yu do?; Yu haffi work tonight?; Yu work weekends?” My reply to the latter was always the same: “No suh! Mi nuh work pon weekends!” My emphatic reply was meant to emphasize the incredulity of the question, but also to signal my own class status as someone who did not perform service work for a living. During fieldwork, men would often tell me that they “could tell I was smart, as simple as dem see mi”. My intelligence symbolized that that I had other employment options available to me. I performed my class position by the way I spoke and my ability to code switch between Jamaican patois, speaking with an African-American accent, and typical American lingo, which many referred to as “talking like white people” was an attempt to exoticize me and distinguish me from their typical female encounters. This ability to code switch meant that aside from having access to other employment options, there was an assumption that I was wealthy or had money because I could so easily “talk white”. With 6 nursing facilities within a 2-mile radius of each other in the Northeast section of The Bronx, in an area marked as a split residential and commercial zone, there is a high likelihood of meeting Afro-Caribbean women who perform some form of service work for a living e.g., domestic, CNA (certified nurse’s aide), home health aide, retail, or food service. When men enquired what kind of work I did and the hours I worked, they were reading me and testing my authenticity as a “yaard ooman”. Meaning, did I perform as a typical Jamaican woman, working extremely long hours to support her family? Would I be of value to them as men, sexually or financially?
When I would turn the tables and ask the men if they were in relationships, the response was usually “yes” and when I inquired what their partners did for a living the common reply was “she do nursing or she's a nurse.” In a conversation with one barber, Jungle, a 34 year old Jamaican with five kids from three different women was very honest when he told me he was married. He too, replied that his wife “does nursing.” The need to specify a “nurse” over “doin’ nursing” elicited another question from me: “is she a nurse or a nurse's aide?” Jungle’s response was marked by the shifting of his body closer to mine, leaning in towards me, lowering his head close to mine, and lowering the tone of his voice to slightly above a whisper: “She a CNA man, she work a lot, a lotta nights.” The signal to the nightshift is occurring on two levels, Jungle, like many other men I encountered during fieldwork, was emphasizing the hardships and challenges of being in relationships with women who are hardly ever home at night, while simultaneously signaling to me his hours of availability, should I be interested in a tryst. Recognizing the innuendos masked beneath their inquiries, my responses were always couched in the women themselves. My reply to Jungle intentionally referred to his wife, and a shifting of my body away from his to create some distance and assert that his suggestion was beneath my standards for a partner: “Mi nuh wan no borrowed goods! Wow, but wid all dem night shift and double shift she mus work hard, hmph!” At that point, Jungle replied with his normal speaking voice: “Yeah man she work hard it’s a shame, ah nuff shit she put up with, but wha yu gwain do? The bills dem haffi pay...”  

This issue of class is significant on many levels. My ethnographic fieldwork reflects the multiple ways class is lived as opposed to ways that class is often addressed and theorized in the

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122 I don’t want any borrowed goods (married men or men who are in relationships)! Wow, but with all those night shifts and double shifts she (your wife) must work very hard.
123 Yeah man, she works hard it’s a shame. She puts up with a lot of shit, but what are you going to do? The bills have to be paid.
context of the workplace, and the spaces in which labor is performed, valued, and commoditized. One can see that the tentacles of service work extend far beyond the workspace itself, but reach the lives of the people who are supported and sustained by the labor of Afro-Caribbean women. These tentacles impact how these women identify themselves, and how the men who share their lives, choose to elevate the status of their partners outside the presence of the Afro-Caribbean women they live and sleep with. By changing their partner’s class status from CNA’s or home health aides to “nurses” the men are indirectly and deliberately trying to elevate their partners’ status. Underlying Jungle’s lowered tone and body language is shame. While his interactions with older women elevate his ego because older women give him money, his economic reality at home is one that diminishes his pride. Helen Safa’s *Myth of the Male Breadwinner* highlights the challenges to Latin American men’s ego and masculinity when women are the primary providers for the household. These same dynamics present themselves in many English-speaking Caribbean households; Jungle’s home was no different.

As a barber he is unable to earn enough money to solely financially sustain the household he shares with his wife, making her the primary breadwinner. Yet knowing that his wife has to put up with “a lotta shit” means that not only does she have to clean “shit” for a living by

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124 For scholarship that addresses the challenges of the workplace in terms of labor organizing, or working on the factory floor, Karen Sacks’ *Caring by Hour*, Rick Fantasia’s *On the Floor*, Halpern & Horowitz’s *Meatpackers*, and Roger Waldinger’s *Still the Promised City* are all useful resources for examining various labor sectors in the United States.

125 One day after Jungle propositioned me for a date, and I turned him down, I asked him what kinds of women he dated or slept with outside of his marriage. I had seen him in a club with a young woman and asked if she was his wife and he told me that the young woman was one of many women he sees because he felt strongly that men were not supposed to have one partner, and that he in particular gets bored in monogamous relationships. He also revealed that the young woman was the exception because he typically dates older women because they like to buy him things and give him money. I wondered on his earnings as a barber if his dealings with older women were more out of necessity than boredom.

emptying bedpans, she must also deal with workplace politics, which may mean being underpaid and overworked in an understaffed environment, and then come home to deal with Jungle’s womanizing ways. Jungle’s elevation of his wife’s status from nursing aide to nurse is an attempt to remove the stigma that he feels is attached to his wife having to perform arduous labor for a living. This also allows him as a husband to remove the stains of his wife’s labor so he can reclaim his masculinity. Jungle’s shifting of job titles symbolizes an attempt to elevate both his and his wife’s class status, because her role as the primary breadwinner defies traditional gender norms of Caribbean women. Even though most households in the Caribbean and specifically Jamaica are matrifocal, Caribbean and Jamaican societies are dictated by patriarchy. Meaning, even if the woman is the primary income earner, a man’s opinion and presence takes precedence because he is the head of the house, if only symbolically, he rules, because patriarchy governs the world. Jungle’s elevation of his wife helps him to reconcile his perception of himself as husband and a man with his reality, by performing the identities he has yet to obtain.

Sociologist Vilna Bashi, in her research on immigrant social networks found that Caribbean men have a higher job turnover rate because the employment networks for Caribbean men are less effective than the employment networks for women. Bashi notes, “[b]ecause men do not have access to jobs where the perks of legality are attached, they have to do more of the jobs that are less stable and do not provide for ways to gain legal status.”127 Jungle as a male Jamaican immigrant who works as a barber may not have the opportunities to find better paying jobs while he waits for his papers, so he, like many other Afro-Caribbean men performs a higher class status by elevating his wife’s class status to nurse. Weber would refer to this appropriation of a higher class status as status honor in which groups that would ordinarily be denied access to

a privileged status pretend to belong to higher status group. “[T]he fact that a given man 
pretends to qualify as a gentleman...at least prima facie, that he will be treated as such.”

Jungle’s appropriation of a higher class status by changing his wife’s job title is a performance, 
but it may also reveal Jungle’s lack of access to better employment opportunities, and perhaps 
his status is elevated if he refers to his wife as a nurse instead of a nurse’s aide. This 
appropriation of status honor occurred quite frequently when I encountered Afro-Caribbean men 
during data collection; it is a performance that Jungle and many men participate in but it is also 
an act that many Afro-Caribbean women do themselves.

Observing the interactions between Afro-Caribbean men and women at social gatherings 
and in commercial establishments, the use of the phrase “mi do nursing” or “mi ah nurse” by 
Afro-Caribbean women was often heard when men were trying to pick women up, but needed to 
ascertain the women’s financial status first. Inquiries into a woman’s job status varied 
depending on the class status and maturity level of the men asking the questions. Some men 
asked these questions because they wanted to know if women would be able to financially 
support the men’s lifestyles. Usually a man interested in how much money a woman earned, was 
in multiple relationships with several women, and landing a woman who has a regular income 
can mean that she can assist or support him financially by helping him to pay bills, child support, 
and in some extreme cases that I observed, just to buy clothing and jewelry. For men who were 
more mature and in search of a relationship, determining a woman’s employment status was 
essential, as one 27 year old Jamaican restaurant worker, Magnet told me while trying to pick me 
up:

128 Weber, Ibid. 117.
“Mi one cyan pay ALL di bills dem, mi wan smbaddy weh can HELP me, an mek we grow together. It’s share ting, yu noh wha mi a seh? We haffi put 2 and 2 together fi mek 4, but di 2 bruck (broke) people cyan work, but if we share di bills dem, we can save an build someting, maybe buy one house. One man ah pay all di bills dem...ah miserable life dat, an mi nuh inna dat! No sah, mi nuh come a foreign fi live miserable. Fi all ah dat ah better mi stay ah yard (Jamaica). Mi prefer go home than live here an miserable up meself.”

Magnet’s insistence on going back home instead of living here in the United States, and “miserable up” himself, means being emburdened by the financial support of another person who is not a child; that being miserable wouldn’t be a temperament that passes once an individual is content with him or herself. Instead being miserable would be a condition that can worsen due to life circumstances which would defy the logic of migrating, being miserable would prevent the Caribbean immigrant dream in America, “to buy one house”. Why would someone sacrifice so much to migrate, only to live a miserable life? That is a reality for many immigrants, especially if the opportunity to elevate one’s status in meaningful ways doesn’t materialize or become evident after many years.

In discussions with Sophisticated Palava, about the phenomenon of Afro-Caribbean women appropriating an elevated class status of being a nurse, she said:

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129 I alone, can’t pay all the bills. I want somebody who can help me and make us grow together. It’s a share thing you know what I’m saying. We have to put 2 and 2 together to make 4. But two broke people can’t work, but if we share the bills, we can save and build something, maybe buy a house. One man paying all the bills is a miserable life, and I’m not into that. No Sir, I didn’t come to foreign to live miserably. For all of that, it’s better I stay in Jamaica. I prefer to go home than to live in the U.S. and miserable up myself (make myself miserable).
“I always ask them “Which nurse?” HELLOOO, you can’t be a nurse and speak as poorly as you do. Nurses go to school, get many years of training and from you hear how the women speak, you know that they are not nurses.

It’s so annoying! If you’re a nurse then you carry yourself like you have an education and training, these low class people always try to bring up themselves! Schewps (sucking teeth).”

In her commentary, Sophisticated Palava switches back and forth between patois and formal English to emphasize and distinguish her own class position and her perceptions about the appropriation of higher class statuses by people she refers to as “low class people.” The ability to code switch, also speaks to a larger issue of mobility, in that Palava is able to perform in white spaces. She may work as a domestic but her education and former profession enable. This issue of mobility also speaks to the hierarchy within Afro-Caribbean immigrant communities that reflects some aspects of Portes’ and Rumbaut’s enclave model, in that many undocumented Afro-Caribbeans never venture outside of the community in which they live. During data collection it was not uncommon to meet undocumented Afro-Caribbeans living in the Northeast Bronx, who hadn’t ventured further than Fordham Road. I recall meeting a man who lived in the Bronx for ten years yet proudly proclaimed he’d only been to Brooklyn twice, and that “me nuh go ah Manhattan! No sah, mi nuh mingle wid di white people dem, dem scare mi!” I recognized that his attitude reflected not only his apprehension with his undocumented status, but

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130 I always ask them, Which nurse?” Hellooo, you can’t be a nurse and speak as poorly as you do. Nurses go to school, get many years of training and from you hear how the women speak, you know that they are not nurses.
131 Portes and Rumbaut, Ibid.
132 I don’t go to Manhattan! No Sir! I don’t mingle (socialize or hang around) with white people. They scare me! This comment also reveals that the man did not feel safe around white people. This mentality was common especially among undocumented immigrants.
also that his mobility to move between spaces and places in New York City, would mean that he would have to find different ways to perform—a skill he had yet to acquire, but it was also a skill he didn’t need. He was able to survive quite well without it.

For Afro-Caribbean women in search of work, they are able to navigate between spaces much easier because they are women. Their sex facilitates mobility between Afro-Caribbean or diverse spaces and white spaces, simply because the Black male body is read and perceived differently than Black female bodies in white spaces. This issue of class and performance is integral to the multifaceted nature of identity formation and transformation in the Caribbean diaspora among Afro-Caribbean service sector workers. Earlier in the chapter, both Sophisticated Palava and Jovial *performed* lower class positions in order to obtain employment and only asserted and articulated their real class backgrounds when their employers disrespected them. The employers’ disrespect relegated the women to an externally imposed lower class position, which meant the Afro-Caribbean participants had to remind themselves and inform their employers who they really were as women.

Likewise, Grace refused the imposition of the title nanny because she was rejecting the lower class status that was being projected onto her. The cases of the men referring to their partners as “nurses” and the women themselves appropriating the higher class status, demonstrates that within this Northeast Bronx community and outside the community in their work environments, class among Afro-Caribbeans is always being performed. Weber would refer to this phenomenon as a privileged class status or status honor that is pre-existing or a status honor that one pretends to have.133 The performance either reaffirms or rejects a former class status, or enables the individual to appropriate an upper or lower class status depending on

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133 Weber, Ibid.
the circumstances and identity that one decides to project or perform. In either case, the
sacrifices and decisions that informed their migration to the U.S. are as ubiquitous as the past,
present, and future identities these Afro-Caribbean participants affirm, perform and deploy.

**Coming All that Way: Afro Caribbean Identities, Upliftment and Traveling to Class**

Embedded in these different class experiences we see how Charity’s class status as a
business owner traveled with her, the same could be said for Sophisticated Palava, who was a
teacher for over 10 years in Jamaica before she migrated. Both women identify with their class
status in Jamaica that afforded them a level of respectability which they took with them when
they migrated. For some Afro-Caribbean women who may not have had a middle-class or upper
working-class social status in the Caribbean, migration represents their opportunity to elevate
themselves or as Sophisticated Palava refers to “bring up themself.” Bringing up themselves
would justify the sacrifice of migration, not enduring the burdens of being the primary provider
as Magnet remarked and becoming miserable and contradicting the reasons for migration—
upliftment.

This aspect of upliftment is a complex one, clearly illustrated in Paule Marshall’s novel
*Brown Girl, Brownstones*, when Selina’s mother, Silla is intent on becoming a homeowner in the
United States by selling her husband’s land back home without his permission, while the
husband Deighton is intent on using that land to build a house in Barbados. Selina’s father is
cognizant that property and land in the Caribbean affords him a level of respectability as a Black
man that can only be performed here in the United States by Deighton’s donning of expensive
suits. Racism and the challenges of the Great Depression and World War II creates more
challenges than opportunities for Black men living in the United States, and sullies any accomplishments associated with owning a house because the lifestyle requires one being a slave to work, whereas Deighton could enjoy his home and life in the Caribbean without the stressors of life. Deighton fantasizes, “And when I show these Bajan here, I gon left them to run themselves in an early grave in the man New York. I going home and breathe good Bimshire air ‘cause a man got a right to take his ease in this life and not always be scuffling.”\textsuperscript{134} Deighton shares his fantasy for a luxurious life in Barbados with his youngest daughter, Selina whose coming of age story the novel centers around. Deighton tells his daughter:

“I got the house clear-clear in my mind now. I gon build it out of good Bajan coral stone and paint it white. Everything gon be white! A gallery with tall white columns at the front like some temple or the other. A parlor with ‘nough furnitures and dining room with glasses of every description and flowers from we our garden…When you want your fancy clothes I gon put you ‘pon a plane to New York to do your shopping. And when these Bajan here see you, they gon say, ‘Wha’lah, wha’lah, look Deighton Selina! I hear that man living like a lord home.’”\textsuperscript{135}

Deighton’s dreams to build a grandiose house on his inherited land in Barbados, symbolizes an attempt to claim and attain a higher class position in both Brooklyn and Barbados. His desire for a white home reflects his fantasies to have a home which mimics colonial administrative buildings or churches in the Caribbean, as opposed to the colorful homes of his Bajan people. His aspirations to live as a wealthy man across the Caribbean diaspora, would mean that he would have to earn and save a lot of money in order to make his dreams become reality. Paule Marshall, expertly recreates the stereotypical benchmark for success among Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the United States and the reason for migration—the ability to buy a house. The pinnacle of Afro-Caribbean achievement is one’s ability to buy a house in the United States and

\textsuperscript{135} Marshall, Ibid., 86-87
still have enough money to build a house in the Caribbean to return to upon retirement.

Typically, the purchase of a house would happen before one decides to build a house back home. In outlining the tensions between Silla and Deighton, Paule Marshall creates a collision of achievement in their marriage, with one spouse aspiring towards the ultimate American dream in the immigrant imagination, while the other spouse is cognizant of the reality of working long hours to buy and maintain a home and ultimately not be able to enjoy it.

Deighton is aware that he needs to save up money to return home and live the life of his dreams as a repatriated Barbadian, but the nature of work for a Black immigrant without citizenship in wartime Brooklyn, means that his dreams will take longer to realize. Despite his economic reality in the United States and Barbados, Deighton sees himself as a Black man who should be wealthy, and living the life of luxury, however his race and immigrant status deny him the ability to attain the white collar positions he aspires towards. Deighton, in turn performs his Black masculinity in defiance by being a womanizer and wearing expensive clothing as protection from the U.S. society that emasculates him, and his Barbadian compatriots who mock him for his performance. Deighton’s fantasies are grounded in the experiences of many first-generation Caribbean immigrants throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. These Caribbean immigrants are relegated to working class service positions despite their educational background in the Caribbean. In the case of Deighton, who despite the educational achievements he acquired through various certification courses taken in the United States, remained unemployed mainly out of choice but also because his race and citizenship status prevent him from capitalizing on his achievements.

Ultimately, Silla does sell Deighton’s land, and in retaliation Deighton decides to spite Silla and compensate himself and for the years of rejection from white collar jobs, racism, and a
sincere desire to elevate his family’s class status among their Caribbean friends. Deighton takes the $900.00 check and cashes it to buy his family expensive clothes, a book certificate worth $100, and a trumpet for himself. The expensive clothes were bought to show off and compete with other Barbadians at an upcoming wedding. It was Deighton’s attempt to claim a certain level and class status through material things. Silla, crushed and angered by Deighton’s actions, vowed “I’ll get the house despite you!” [S]he cried against his loud laugh, “I’ll buy it yet.”\textsuperscript{136} Their relationship issues reflect the complex gender dynamics that arose during wartime when women had access to factory jobs to replace the largely male workforce that was enrolled in the armed forces. For immigrant men and immigrant men of color who were not enlisted, their inability to obtain factory jobs and capitalize on the war due to their race, meant that immigrant women of color and women in general who were fortunate to leave domestic work and obtain factory jobs, now earned more money than their male counterparts, who were still relegated to low-paying service positions. The relationship struggles between Silla and Deighton reflect two different methods and plans for the elevation of their class status as an immigrant family, and those plans collided along gendered and economic lines. Through literature we see how Afro-Caribbeans are striving for economic and social upliftment post-migration, and the performance aspect of class identity is reflected in how Afro-Caribbeans see themselves and in the investment placed on how their peers perceive them. Outside of literature, we see how the goals for social upliftment can take different turns, and not every Afro-Caribbean immigrant who migrates to the United States has the same options available to them. If one migrates and has no family or support system, one’s first priority is survival and dreams are deferred until one is secure enough to stay.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 131
Tales of Two Classes

Ethnographer’s Note: The following section discusses some of the challenges for undocumented workers in the food service industry. It occurred to me that mentioning the establishments or providing descriptors of the areas where these businesses are located makes the people who work there vulnerable. Additionally, the businesses that employ these workers become vulnerable as well. In light of the delicate nature of this topic, I still feel that it’s important for these stories to be told.

The subject of class extends beyond Afro-Caribbeans appropriating class positions in an effort to appear to belong to higher class position. Sometimes the performance of class is an act of survival for Afro-Caribbean women here in the United States and in the Caribbean. While I never asked Strong Sacrifice what her immigration status was, I surmised that she might not be here legally based on the way she ended her violent bus encounter with the old white woman calling her nigger. Strong Sacrifice a 38 year old Jamaican who migrated during the early 2000s, was an office administrator and lived a comfortable middle class life-style complete with helpers at home, and a secretary at work. Her need to be able to financially support her adolescent son after she migrated required taking any job that would pay her, even though she would not be able to utilize her administrative skills from back home. Strong Sacrifice did not have family in New York, so she took the first job she could get in the food industry serving food. Strong Sacrifice, told me “Christine, when I first came here and got the job in the Jamaican restaurant I had a lot of food thrown at me, because I had no idea how to serve food, this was something my helper did, and at work my secretary got my food. Yu know how much pattie de customer dem fling back at me? How much food dem throw back at me? Heheyyy! (Chuckling to herself) Coming here was a real let-down, you don’t know.” Strong Sacrifice’s economic reality post

137 Do you know how many patties the customers flung back at me? How much food they threw back at me?
migration necessitated her working for extremely long hours, sometimes almost 12 hours per day for low pay to support her child. Having food thrown back at her by angry customers was a small sacrifice for Strong Sacrifice to be able to provide for her son. Although Strong Sacrifice came to the United States to be with her son, she had to acclimate to a new country, new class position, and a new lifestyle without any financial assistance from her son’s father. She functioned like many other single-parents, and worked hard to make sure she and her son had a roof over their heads, and prayed that her son was safe at home alone while she worked long hours to provide for him.

Many Afro-Caribbean women come to New York and end up working in the food service industry as servers and cashiers because not only are they undocumented, they lack an employment network to help them obtain domestic work. Typically, these women migrate to no relations at all, and work in the restaurant industry for years supporting themselves and their children on meager incomes. Even though they may serve and interface with 50-100 customers per day if they work for a moderately successful business, no one knows the struggles they endure to stay in the United States and the toll it takes on them emotionally. I would frequent one restaurant because I liked their food and would always get the nastiest treatment from one particular server, Evelyn. She was a Jamaican who looked to be in her late 30s but life had aged her and she had one of the nastiest attitudes I’ve ever encountered in my life. In Caribbean popular culture, one can find videos of comedic skits on the internet and YouTube about the nasty attitudes of servers and cashiers in Jamaican restaurants.138 While we laugh at the accurate

138The Real McCoy, a 1990s British comedy that ran for five years, depicts the rude and nasty attitudes of Jamaican restaurant staff. The restaurant name Misrys, is a play on the word misery, and unfortunately reflects the miserable life that many undocumented Afro-Caribbean immigrants live in foreign (either the UK or US). 
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0m-GJ0bCNY
displays of rudeness in these skits, one rarely stops to think why some of these women and men are so nasty towards their customers. What we reduce to cultural humor often hides a challenging reality of working for minimum wage or less, and working extremely long hours standing on one’s feet for 12-14 hours per day working to support children here or their children and family back home.

Returning to my encounters with Evelyn, after moving past my initial disgust with her nasty attitude, I decided to change the way I engaged her, and I also made a concerted effort to visit the restaurant during down times, between lunch and dinner rushes. It was during these down times that I sometimes waited 15 or 20 minutes for my food, because the cooks were taking their breaks. During these lulls, I got to speak with the women and also listen to their conversations. My interaction with the women in between rushes allowed me to see that one of the main reasons why Evelyn was so nasty towards me is that she initially did not have her daughter with her. When other women would talk about their kids she would remain quiet. I also noticed that she worked extremely long hours, often working from the restaurant opened at 7a in the morning until it closed at 11p at night. If I were coming home late at night and walked past the restaurant as the workers were leaving, Evelyn was almost always there walking out with a small group of no more than four or five women and men who had also worked to closing. Some women would exclaim how tired they were and how they now had to go home and get some rest, a few of them would say that it was too late to call their kids because their children would have gone to bed already. It was then I realized that most of the older women who were in their thirties and early forties and working in the restaurant did not have their children with them. Their desire to see how the children were doing explained the longing the wistful looks at

There’s also comedy by Mike Yard, a comic who imitates Jamaican dialects does many jokes on the rudeness of Jamaicans. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfHZWDPymDQ
male and female customers who entered the restaurant with their children, and special care was taken when parents asked if certain dishes could be prepared less spicy to accommodate their children’s palate. Usually special requests by customers were met with abrasiveness, irritation and refusal, when customers came with children, the energy and attitudes in the women and especially Evelyn changed. She didn’t care if she held up the line asking the child which piece of meat or fish the child preferred. The parents of the children were extremely appreciative of Evelyn’s kindness that many would ask if she had kids, at which point she would reply with a tinge of sadness in her voice: “Yes, but she’s not with me.”

As a Jamaican woman coming into the restaurant most people (customers and workers) assumed I had children. Many of them were shocked when I told them I didn’t have any kids yet, and then I noticed the worker’s demeanor towards me changed, some of the male workers became intrigued and would inquire if I had a husband and if I lived alone. Upon learning that I was unmarried, the men would then offer to assist me with things around the house, touting how handy, helpful, and strong they were and that as a woman I would need someone around to “help wid tings”. I would often engage in playful banter and assured them that I had everything under control. Usually the men would insist I take down their number to call them “anytime, day or night” and my response remained steadfast: “that’s okay, mi nah call yu. Mi Allllright!” On the other hand, when the women working in the restaurant learned that I did not have children yet, their engagement changed from resentment towards me because they initially thought I had a privilege they didn’t have—to have their children with them, to one of curiosity with many wondering why I didn’t have children yet and why I wasn’t married. These Afro-Caribbean women working in the restaurant for extremely long hours reflected their daily realities as
transnational parents and the challenges of raising children across the Caribbean diaspora. Like Distant Mother, these women being thousands of miles apart from their children worked long hours and then spent hours on the phone doing homework with their children, spending time with their kids in the best way they knew how.

After a year of observing the women in the restaurant, I began to notice changes in Evelyn. I would no longer see her closing the restaurant at nights, I wouldn’t even see her early mornings when I passed the restaurant on my morning walks, I only saw her between the hours of 8a-4p and she no longer worked until closing every night, instead Evelyn only closed the restaurant on Saturdays during one weekend per month. On that one night that she did work, she no longer walked home with the other women, instead she took a taxi or someone came to pick her up. Aside from the changes in Evelyn’s hours and shifts, I also noticed her demeanor changed not only towards customers with children, she met the customers’ preferences with cheer, and her demeanor towards me changed as well. She no longer looked at children who came to the restaurant with their parents with a longing in her eyes. I also noticed that Evelyn now smiled and laughed with me, and her disposition was the complete opposite from when I first began to patronize the restaurant a year earlier, the difference was that Evelyn was finally reunited with her daughter. She no longer opened and closed the restaurant because she had to drop her daughter off at school in the mornings and pick her up from afterschool.

I found this out after stopping in the restaurant one afternoon between the lunch and dinner rushes and the women were speaking about parenting and rewarding children for the good work they do in school. It was then that Evelyn revealed that when she didn’t have her daughter with her for over a year that it was the hardest thing she ever had to do and she felt bad about all

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139 Hondagnue and Sotelo, Ibid.
the things she missed out on. “It was terrible being away from her! I missed her so much! Some mornings I didn’t even want to leave my bed, much less come to work de way it hurt mi not to have her with me. At first mi try to grin a bear but after a while mi couldn’t even smile. Fi what? Smile? And I mi cyan be wid mid one pickney! God only know!”

Listening to Evelyn I recognized that she was acutely aware that interacting with the public as a cashier and server in a public space like the Jamaican restaurant required one to be pleasant, but the pain of not raising her child meant that although she worked and performed her duties as required, she could not act personable and happy to towards customers when she wasn’t happy with her own circumstances.

Evelyn’s revelation also included a critique of some women she knew who were also away from their children but in her eyes were not as heartbroken being separated from their children as she was being separated from her daughter. “Mi nuh noh how some women do it, put on make-up and hair and nice boot and go out like it’s nothing…I couldn’t do that knowing that my daughter wasn’t with me.” Shanice, another worker who is in her 30s was standing nearby agreed with Evelyn: “Mi neither. Look from when mi hair wan do? Right ya now, mi cyan siddung inna nobody shop fi how much hour and spend how much money pon hair when dat de same money de cudda feed mi pickney dem. No sah! Dem gal de ah nuh modda. I don’t know WHAT fi call dem!”

Evelyn talked about giving her daughter small rewards like a new 140 At first I tried to grin and bear it but after a while I couldn’t even smile. For what? Smile? And I can’t be with my one child. Only God knows! 141 Me neither. Do you know it’s been a long time since I’ve gone to the hairdresser and gotten my done? Right now I can’t sit down in a beauty salon for so many hours and spend a lot of money when that same money could feed my kids. No sir, those women aren’t mothers…While Evelyn and Shanice were critical of women who chose instead to go out and have fun instead of sending all of their additional funds to their children back home, I had to refrain from passing the same judgement because every parent handles being separated from her children differently. I went for a haircut from Jungle and he was dressed up wearing a brand new piece of very expensive gold jewelry and he asked me to go out on a date with him. I declined, but couldn’t help asking Jungle about his children, and he responded that his kids were “Alright I guess…”
sparkly clip for her hair or taking her for ice cream if her daughter earned high marks on a test
because she said: “It’s important for kids to feel good about themselves, when they feel good,
they can perform with confidence. I know some people will say I spoil my child, but I want her
to be her best, and in order for that to happen she has to feel her best!” Evelyn also spoke so
lovingly about getting her daughter ready in the mornings and preparing her daughter’s breakfast
before she left for school, that she made the social reproductive tasks of parenting sound like a
beloved treasure. As I looked at Evelyn’s face beaming with pride as she spoke about packing
her daughter’s lunch because her child is a picky eater, I noticed the looks in the other women’s
faces, and in their eyes was sadness and longing. Shanice said that she had to break it to her
kids that she couldn’t afford to send them $50 every few days, because she had to budget her
funds wisely. Shanice added:

“If dem eva noh how hard mi haffi work fi dat $50! But they are kids, dem
nuh understand how hard life is here. It’s hard fi just live, much less
scramble to send $300 to dem every month. Ah 3 ah dem mi have an mi miss dem
so much. It hard fi dem, but most times it harder fi mi, fi noh say mi cyan even
kiss and love dem up every day like mi used to...BUT it’s ONLY for a time. God’s
Shanice’s proclamation that foreign wasn’t easy reveals more than she realizes, especially for undocumented workers in the food industry. Her comments also reflect the challenging reality of earning a meager income to support two households, her own up here in New York, and her children’s in Jamaica. Shanice’s comments also show that as a woman raising her children from a distance that her separation from her family will hopefully only be temporary one because the sacrifice of coming here and staying here takes a toll on everyone.143

Many undocumented Afro-Caribbean women in the food industry interact with many customers, most of whom are men. There is a very common but strange dynamic around sharing out food that occurs depending on the restaurant one patronizes. Typically, many female servers will share out less food for female customers than they do for male customers.144

142 If my children ever knew how hard I have to work for that $50.00! But they are kids, they don’t understand how hard life is here. It’s hard to just live, much less scramble to send them $300.00 every month. I have 3 kids and I miss them so much. It’s hard for them but most times it’s harder for me to know that I can’t even kiss and love them up every day like I used to. But it’s only for a time. God’s willing! They think foreign is easy! Foreign? Foreign? Schewps (kissing her teeth) Foreign isn’t easy at ALL!

143 Melanie Nicholson. 2006 “Without Their Children: Rethinking Motherhood among Transnational Migrant Women” in Social Text 88, 24:3, pp. 13-33. This work on transnational motherhood among Latin American migrant women working in restaurants further highlights how challenging working in the restaurant industry is for female workers and the huge sacrifices that parents make. Unlike the participants in my research who interacted with the public on a daily basis, Nicholson’s participants worked in restaurant kitchens and rarely had interactions with the public, but more importantly her research demonstrates that the sacrifice of working long hours for low pay is justified because of the sacrifice economically beneficial for the family as a whole.

144 The irony of this dynamic is that more often than not, female customers aren’t just buying food for themselves it’s also for their children. If the women don’t have a partner or are single, they are buying food intending to have leftovers. The only exception is if the women are on their cell phones asking their partner what kind of meal they want, only then will many female
to realize that aside from some really warped gender politics at play, that many servers who are undocumented share out more food for male customers in the hopes that if, by chance, one of the men is single and documented then he will be able to help her to get her papers. Some men, are keenly aware of this, and many pretend that they are documented only to have unlimited access to these women’s bodies with no intentions of helping them out.

Based on my observations, the situations vary depending on the age of the servers and the men they are sleeping with. Women in their thirties and forties are more likely to deal with older men who are married, yet promise to give the women their papers once they divorce from their wives. These divorces never happen, and during my research I found that many women engage in anal sex in the hopes that the men will be so enticed by the “freaky” sex they will eventually leave their wives. Unfortunately, it never happens, and many women just keep on getting exploited and used, never actually becoming straight, and serving a side of bitterness and nastiness with each customer transaction. Strong Sacrifice noted:

“A lot of these men are dogs. Man is dog, you know? They can’t go to their wives with the anal sex thing, but choose to wear out these women’s bottoms knowing damn well they can’t do a TING fi dem. Schewps! (sucking teeth loudly) It’s sad, very sad. I have a lot of girlfriends in these restaurants who have hard life, all due to these men and dem dirty stinking ways. Dem cheat pon dem wife, dem cheat pon you. Oh God! To be a woman in dis country with no papers is a terrible ting.

Terrible!”

servers treat female customers equitably to male customers. Unfortunately, I have experimented with this many times, and found these gender politics at play around food sharing between women.

A lot of these men are dogs. Man is dog, you know? They can’t go to their wives with the anal sex thing, but choose to wear out these women’s bottoms knowing damn well, they can’t do
Depending on the women’s backgrounds, they more than likely end up staying in very exploitive dynamics in terms of their jobs and in their relationships. For women who don’t have children and are in their thirties and forties, they struggle to make ends meet, and the realization of their dreams become more elusive with each passing year.

For Afro-Caribbean women who are young and undocumented, their path is both sad and unfortunate. Frequenting the same restaurant that Evelyn works in, I noticed that of the ten cashiers and servers, four were women in their thirties or forties, and six of the young women were in their twenties. I realized that the women in their early twenties chose different paths than their older counterparts. Of the six servers, five of them became pregnant in less than two years. I realized during my visits that many of these young women got involved with men who promised to help them get their papers. For the men they sleep with, the allure of having a young woman as a girlfriend is that she is young, healthy, and fertile. These married or “single” men promise these young women a secure future that they had no intention of delivering on. Several times, I would overhear the managers ask the servers and cashiers to stay later or to cover one of the young women’s shifts, and each time it was a different name but the same circumstances. The older servers would complain amongst each other followed by the constant refrain: “Mi nuh understand, from she breed fi dis guy and have baby im gone. Now, ah she one ah struggle wid di baby, and him gone! No papers, no help, nuttin! Ah betta she did stay by herself because she cyan even get nobody fi watch di baby so she can earn likkle money fi pay ar

a thing for them. Schewps! (kissing teeth loudly) It’s sad, very sad…I have a lot of girlfriends in these restaurants who have a hard life, all due to these men and their dirty stinking ways. They cheat on their wives, they cheat on you. Oh God! To be a woman in this country with no papers (documentation) is a terrible thing. Terrible!”
bills. Fi go through all ah dat and nuh even have papers fi show? Dem betta dan me!

Schewps!"146

While the other servers are fully cognizant that these young women have complicated their lives unnecessarily, the young women clearly saw this is an opportunity to become documented. Unfortunately, these young women worked long hours for low pay without children, and now must try to support themselves and now a small child on resources that were meager to begin within. The exploitive circumstances of their realities gets further compounded when they have what Sophisticated Palava refers to as a “patchwork” meaning the young women end up having multiple children with different men who promise to improve the women’s circumstances but only end up plunging the women and their children further into poverty. The young women aren’t passive actors in their own lives, but it does show that having a support network and an established career prior to migrations, affords many undocumented women with a few more options post-migration. It can mean the difference between working in a restaurant for a few years before transitioning to homecare work and domestic work, or remaining an impoverished restaurant worker.

This chapter shows that class travels across the Caribbean spaces but it doesn’t always travel upwards to an elevated class status. Depending on one’s accessibility to support networks and resources, one can either defy the stereotypical immigrant narrative or inadvertently reproduce it in a woman’s efforts to secure her future and that of her children. This chapter also demonstrates how women envision themselves in the world, and for older women like Charity,

146 I don’t understand, from she got pregnant for this guy and had a baby, he’s gone. Now she’s alone struggling with the baby and he’s gone. No papers, no help, nothing! It would’ve been better if she stayed by herself because she can’t get anyone to watch the baby so she can earn a little money to pay for her bills. To go through all of that and not even have papers to show? These young women are better than me! (Sarcastically). Schewps! (sucking of teeth)
who came here documented in the 1980s, had different choices than the women who are undocumented working in the food industry today. Charity’s charge to the woman at the agency to “send to Israel” to get Jewish people to be a live-in domestic and her assertion that she was not a slave, means that within Charity’s understanding of class and race in the United States meant that she was not going to let her identity as a Black woman from Jamaica with a minimal education be associated with slave labor. Charity’s grandmother was a slave, and that was a status that she was not going to return two generations later. Charity recognized in the 1980s that while her employment options were limited she was not going to subject herself working under slave-like conditions, her consciousness and social status that traveled with her refuses to be relegated to that of a slave. Based on Charity’s upbringing, her class consciousness is uniquely tied to her race consciousness as a Black woman. Charity notes “if we as Black people can come together, can you imagine how we can change this world? My dear we have power, lots of power and if we stick together we can do things!” Charity’s idea of doing things comes in the form of contributing to building a school in Gambia, collecting clothes, and helping them to get computers. Her class and race consciousness is reflective of a diasporic and Pan-African consciousness that is tied to the upliftment of Black people globally. Traveling to class is not just about Charity being able to uplift herself and family, it’s also about seeing oneself as part of the African diaspora and thinking of Black uplift and elevated class consciousness globally.

In Stuart Hall’s exploration into the complex linkages between cultural identity and diaspora, we learn that, “[i]dentity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted
within, not outside, representation."147 There is an active process or production of identity for the women and for their partners. Once we move away from the work environment and examine Afro-Caribbean women’s lives we see how class, masculinity, femininity, race, and culture become the entanglements and negotiations of identity in the context of migration. These entanglements and negotiations reflect the richness and complexities of Afro-Caribbean women who perform service work for a living, they are also reflective of the people who share their lives, and so are entangled and must negotiate and reconfigure their identities because of their circumstances too.

Several months after I interviewed Sweet Presence, a 57 year-old Afro-Cuban who worked as a companion, I ran into her at a family gathering. Sweet Presence is the partner of a distant relative of mine, and is a short Black woman with a calm, balanced energy who looks much younger than her 57 years. At the end of the gathering she asked how my writing was coming along, and if I had started the chapter that would include her interview. I told her that I hadn’t begun the chapter on labor yet, because I was still struggling to write the chapter on Blackness and race. Sweet Presence then wanted to know if I had a title for my dissertation as yet. Standing in the kitchen while she packed away a small portion of potato salad in a ziplock bag, I mentioned that I was toying with changing the title from “Moving through Crossroads” to “A Means to an End”. Sweet Presence placed the small plastic bag on the counter and pressed the bag with her fingers to seal the zippered opening in very slow deliberate movements and got very quiet. I asked her if everything was okay and she said “Yes.”

“I’m just thinking about your title...You’re the scholar and I’m sure you have your own reasons for calling it that, but just hearing your title, kinda makes me sad...I never...I NEVER thought of it that way, but you’re right! That’s what we do. That’s what I’m doing, I’m taking caring of her [her employer] until the very end. I told her, I wouldn’t leave her until she dies. I made that promise, but Wow! Hearing someone else say it, brings what I do into new light. We really do a lot, it’s a huge responsibility, but what ya gonna do? I keep my promises, and
with her daughter estranged from her and not wanting to be bothered, it all falls on me. A means to an end...go figure [chuckling softly].

We went back to packing up the food and it occurred to me as a researcher, that I had been so intent on capturing my participant’s narratives outside of the context of their work, it didn’t occur to me to think about the challenging tasks and responsibilities they undertook during the course of their work. I thought the phrase “a means to an end” would be most appropriate because it spoke to the reality that most of the Afro-Caribbean women I interviewed, worked in the service sector as means to an end. Whether the work they performed was above or below what they were accustomed to in the Caribbean, these women could perform the labor for several years because it provided an opportunity for them to work towards their ultimate goal. The service work enabled them to achieve their means, be it a green card, financial security, paying for their children’s or grandchildren’s education, buying and building a house back home, providing for family members in the Caribbean diaspora or providing the basic means to live here in New York. The service work didn’t define them as women, because they functioned in so many different capacities.

After dinner that night, I decided to ask Sweet Presence if she’d be willing to give me an interview. She jumped at the chance to speak with me and we made arrangements to do a phone interview because our scheduled in-person interview kept getting re-scheduled. I called Sweet Presence on a weekday evening after she made sure her employer was comfortable in bed, and then Sweet Presence left her employer’s apartment and went next door to her own apartment for our phone interview. We spoke for almost 5 hours and her story began as a second-generation Afro-Cuban immigrant who lived in Washington Heights with her mother and grandmother.
Even as a teenager in the 1960s, Sweet Presence’s Afro-Cuban identity was a complicated issue. As a radical and politically engaged teenager who wanted to get involved in helping her Washington Heights community, Sweet Presence found that she was too “Black” for the Latin Kings and not “Black enough” for the Black Panther Party. Her inability to fit in somehow became a marker for the rest of her life, and even 40 years later working as a companion, her narrative is not the typical narrative of oppression for domestics and healthcare workers.

Sweet Presence’s position and relationship with her employer was an anomaly and her personal experiences are indicative of the complexity surrounding the performance of labor and the value placed on that performance. A means to an end taking care of an elderly client was something quite different for Sweet Presence who is a U.S. citizen than it is for most Afro-Caribbean immigrant women. For many women not born in the United States who enter the labor sector via domestic work or the healthcare sector, a means to an end takes on an entirely different meaning, and for many Afro-Caribbean women achieving one’s goals means obtaining one’s papers and being able to work towards the larger vision they had of themselves when they first arrived. Being an undocumented immigrant can mean enduring untenable situations, along with having to negotiate and navigate extremely difficult racial and ethnic terrains.

During a phone conversation with Kindness, Prayerful’s youngest daughter she discussed the issue of labor and identity among Afro-Caribbean women and noted quite succinctly that the work these women perform is “simply just a vehicle to help them move forward to their ultimate goal, which is not looking into these white folks’ faces every day. It’s temporary, no matter how long they do it; it’s temporary, because nothing lasts forever. As my mom puts it, “only salvation ALONE lasts forever” so these women work and they work very, very hard because the larger vision and goal is always in sight!” Kindness could have this opinion because of the
women in her family like her grandmother, mother, cousins, who performed in the service sector by working as nannies, home health aides, companions, certified nurse’s aides often worked long hours of overtime away from their children and loved ones and they performed with the knowledge, hope and faith that it wouldn’t be forever. It was a sacrifice for an even bigger reward somewhere in the near or distant future.

Kindnesses’ mindset was the primary reason behind the change in title, but as I stood in the kitchen with Sweet Presence, I realized that like every other aspect of this research around these women’s lives, the phrase was more complex than that. Sweet Presence was speaking from her experience of being a companion to a very wealthy, elderly employer in Riverdale. Sweet Presence’s employer is a retired physician in her 90s, whose daughter is so estranged from her that the employer (who still has her faculties and will be referred to as Spitfire, for her personality) made Sweet Presence her power-of-attorney over her estate. Sweet Presence, like Grace defies the stereotypes of domestics and service workers employed by wealthy employers not just because of her salary, but also the ability to have certain privileges bestowed upon her which symbolizes that Sweet Presence’s role in Spitfire’s life extends far beyond the title of companion or worker.

Similarly, Grace, as an undocumented Jamaican immigrant earned more money working as a domestic than she currently earns working with her green card as a teacher at an independent school. Sweet Presence’s employer is so generous that she bought the apartment next door for Sweet Presence to reduce her commuting time from home to her position as a companion. Aside from this arrangement being beneficial to Spitfire, it is also beneficial to Sweet Presence, because Spitfire’s generosity demonstrates that Spitfire values and appreciates Sweet Presence enough that she has ensured that Sweet Presence will have a sense of security by leaving Sweet
Presence not just property—but her own home. This act of kindness also symbolizes Spitfire’s consciousness as an employer and the practicality of providing housing security for a woman who is a breast cancer survivor, but at the age of fifty-seven may never re-enter the workforce full time due to health issues. From a feminist anthropological and womanist perspective contextualized with the concept of reciprocity these acts or exchanges between Sweet Presence and Spitfire symbolize women taking care of women with each providing something of value that can never be measured, thereby adding to the value of each woman’s life towards one common goal—security. For women who are aging, the need for a secure future before one dies is vital but it often comes in a myriad of ways depending on the generosity or consciousness of the employer and the women themselves.

During my fieldwork I listened to stories of employers leaving some of Afro-Caribbean participants’ money in their wills. Some women were given money to pay for healthcare and living expenses when they needed surgery, while others received a lump sum payment of several thousand dollars as gratitude for the many years of service they provided. The generosity of employers can come in multiple ways, such as providing the means for the employee they value the most to remain with them. In the case of Sweet Presence, Spitfire was very amenable to hiring additional staff to assist Sweet Presence with her daily responsibilities. To lighten her load, Sweet Presence was able to hire 2-3 staff members to assist her with Spitfire. Each woman earns approximately 50k-60k/year because part of Sweet Presence’s agreement with Spitfire is that she does not do any cleaning, and requires time off on a weekly basis to tend to her own affairs or just to get a much needed break. Being on call as a companion, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week is quite stressful. As a breast cancer survivor, Sweet Presence must ensure that her health is maintained while she cares for Spitfire. “Things got to a point where I was burnt out, I mean
really burnt out, and so we had a talk and came up with an arrangement that works best for both of us. Now, I’m not gonna lie and say everything is peachy keen, but it was better than it was when I first became full-time with her, but even now, as she’s rapidly declining and getting weak, I still find it stressful, and I have to be mindful of that for my own health, life, and loved ones.” While Sweet Presence’s experience is an anomaly I think it is important to expand her narrative to gain a greater context of “a means to an end.”

**Sweet Presence: It’s Not Just about Care, it’s More than That**

Placing Sweet Presence’s narrative in further context, we can see that she does not fit the stereotype of the typical companion earning $7.25/hr to keep elderly clients company. Almost 30 years ago, when Prayerful was a companion and home health aide in the 1980s she earned $2.50/hour and while pay has almost quadrupled in 30 years, the wages still don’t provide enough compensation, because most companions end up performing the work of home health aides but don’t get the additional dollar for their hourly wage. I didn’t ask what Sweet Presence earned for a living, but she shared that with the gift of the apartment, her salary is “fair.” For someone like Sweet Presence who is a companion and holds power-of-attorney, she must ensure that Spitfire’s assets do not rapidly dwindle but will provide enough security should Spitfire live into her late 90s and beyond. Sweet Presence's responsibility to Spitfire's financial security, also extends to keeping Spitfire alive and engaged so she has a good quality of life and does not get too depressed with aging and her health issues. About 3 hours into our 5 hour interview, Sweet Presence mentioned a dynamic that took me by surprise because it is virtually unheard of in
companion-employer relationships: Sweet Presence spoke of the business she and Spitfire started a few years ago:

“I told you about the business...I must've skipped it. So during my boredom with Spitfire, she’s an excellent cook and she makes excellent soups, and I have a friend who opened up a restaurant in Harlem and I told him about her soups, and he said 'Oh, so she should make a soup for the restaurant.’” So I said okay, so I told Spitfire and now at this restaurant in Harlem we make gazpacho soup. So we designed a label, I have a container, and every two weeks we ship him 8 containers of soup, and now we increased it to fruit tarts. SO she gave me her recipe, and she’s such a talented woman!

There’s a lot of things she doesn’t do anymore, and one of the things I told her was that I wanted all her recipes. She said to me, “you can take anything you want out of the house when I die.” I said "No, we can’t wait for that, we have to make the soups now to keep you busy." So we make soups, now we make tarts, and I’m making quiche. I keep her busy and we watch Netflix and she’s taught me how to do needlepoint. So I have turned it into a better situation for her life, and I’m learning skills that I probably would’ve never learned...but I still want my life. The freedom to do something for [ME], and now I’ve been tossing back and forth the teaching thing. I’m not gonna go to school in September. I think I don’t want to be away from her. I think...I think the end is near and I don’t want to be that far away.”
It is clear that in order to maintain a good quality of life, Sweet Presence must make sacrifices of her own—forgoing continuing her education, so that Spitfire doesn’t die alone. Sweet Presence and Spitfire’s relationship mirrors more of a mother-daughter relationship, than just employer and employee, there is a business involved, and more importantly than the business is the challenge of being both companion and caregiver. Sweet Presence is also concerned about Spitfire’s quality of life. One can surmise from the passage above, that Sweet Presence is well aware of depression among the elderly population which is why she keeps Spitfire active with cooking and needlepoint so that in her 90s, Spitfire still feels valued and useful, which is a challenge for most elderly people. There is a deep bond and intimate relationship between Sweet Presence and Spitfire, and to commit to seeing someone through their transition when they leave this world is a significant responsibility for anyone. This is especially true for Sweet Presence who is not a blood relation or life partner to Spitfire. In fact Spitfire occupies many roles for Sweet Presence as her employer, pseudo mother, benefactor, and friend.  

148

Seeing it to the End

The task of seeing someone to their end is an issue that came up frequently in interviews with participants. Sophisticated Palava spoke of an employer for whom she worked when she first came to this country. According to Sophisticated Palava, the elderly Jewish woman lived in Portchester, a suburb in Lower Westchester, and at the time had a double mastectomy and

148 Sadly, in a recent phone call with Sweet Presence, she informed me that Spitfire had passed away while Sweet Presence was on vacation in Puerto Rico with her partner. So the very thing that Sweet Presence had promised to see Spitfire through to the very end was unable to be fulfilled. At least they shared another three and a half years together from my initial interview.
needed around the clock care. Palava got the work through a friend, who was on a four month vacation from her nursing position at GC Foster in Jamaica. One spring afternoon, I sat around Palava’s dining room table and listened to her speak so lovingly about this woman, one would think that they had known each other for years, instead of a few months before the Jewish woman died. I asked Palava, what was so special about this particular employer whom she was visibly choked up about. “Ughhh! Oh, I can’t explain, she was just different. She didn’t treat me like the others tended to treat you. She spoke to you respectfully and treated you with respect. She really VALUED me. And Ohhh, you wouldn’t know how important that is. Although this was an elderly lady, she had a lot of integrity. Very nice Jewish woman, but not because I was taking care of her, she treated me like a human being. So I was more like a family with her. When my girlfriend returned to the job, I used to just go on weekends. Then I realized I needed more money, so I started looking a job that I could work 5 days a week. I gave it to a girlfriend of mine who was visiting. She was on long leave vacation, four months from Jamaica, so she died within that span.” Unfortunately for Palava, her friend returned from Jamaica, and resumed her position.149 The old Jewish lady died shortly thereafter, and Palava said:

“When I heard, I was like No! No! No! Not her! I cried and cried, because she always said that she would want me to be there when she died, but I wasn’t and because they were Jews, she was buried the next day, so I didn’t get to go the funeral. In fact I didn’t hear about her death until a few weeks later, but the family and I kept in contact for many years after that. That lady was a good person, I was really sorry to hear that she passed. You have Jews, and you have

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149 Bashi speaks to the effectiveness of networks among Caribbean women. Palava’s ability to gain employment is indicative of how extensive the networks are that these women are able to stay connected from the Caribbean to New York and provide work opportunities for each other.
The ability to find joy in one’s work to the extent it doesn’t feel like work, is a recurring theme found in the research I conducted over a 2 ½ year period. The Afro-Caribbean participants who shared their experiences working for good employers, meaning employers who really valued them as women, and valued the labor the Afro-Caribbean women performed for them, seems to be an integral part to being able to see one through to their end. Perhaps it is because the value these employers placed on the contributions the Afro-Caribbean women added to their lives also spoke to the multiple identities the women held in the Caribbean and the multiple identities they hold here in New York as mothers, daughters, sisters, partners, church members, etc. While all of the female participants who spoke of the employer/client relationships they most valued, none of them actually saw their employers/clients through to their end, even if they committed to doing so. Circumstances always arose in which the employer/client passed away while the women were either on vacation, had a day off, or had been temporarily reassigned to another case and were desperately trying to get back their old case.

The latter scenario was that of Prayerful. The task of seeing their employers/clients through to the very end often fell on the shoulders of other Black women who had not developed such a close bond with the employers/clients either due to time constraints or personality differences. I could not help but think that since these relationships appeared to be more emotionally involved than most employer-employee relationships, it is as if the women were spared from seeing the final act of transition. Absent of the paternalism and maternalism, their
stories of their employer’s/client’s transition was very much like a loved one sparing or shielding their relatives from any potential emotional trauma associated with death and dying. These relationships are indicative of how much employers can provide positive life experiences for their employees.

Prayerful spoke of her employer, Mr. Goldstein with such love that one would’ve thought that she was reflecting on a personal relationship with a close blood relative. As we sat in her living room on a hot summer day, Prayerful shared her experience working with Mr. Goldstein, an elderly Jewish man. One can surmise that at $2.75/hour, Mr. Goldstein had to have valued Prayerful in such a way that she didn’t mind sleeping on the floor in his room at night to keep him company. Typically, a home health aide, sleeping on the floor, would be grounds for quitting, but as Prayerful put it:

“I didn’t mind. I didn’t mind not one bit. They gave me plenty of blankets so I would be comfortable and warm. Some place not even gi yu dat, not even one comfortable chair fi siddung inna. He was such a sweet old man, his wife was very nice too. Lawd, he had a heart of gold yu noh, yu nuh find people like dat again. Hmph! (sighing) He was so understanding and would sign for me so I could get paid the 3 hours even if I was late, because of di bus dem, and rushing from mi odder case dem. Sometime standing up inna di rain, snow, waiting fi di bus and dem run slow. It was hard, but because he know I had di kids dem, if di weather was bad, him mek mi go home early so I don’t get stranded. Him really treat mi wid respect and value mi. He had compassion and I can’t forget kindness. No sah! Not me. When I heard he passed, mi bawl, mi bawl, mi bawl! My God! Umph! It wasn’t that he left me a likkle money in his will, he was just a
“beautiful soul. Whatever he ask, you do it to mek im comfortable. And you didn’t mind doing it, because of di kind of person he was. May God rest his soul…”

Clearly, for Prayerful, having an employer who treated her with kindness and compassion meant that he valued her and the services she provided. More importantly, while her wages as a home health aide and eventually a certified nurse’s aide exceeded her former salary as a garment worker in a Kingston factory, Prayerful was cognizant as a recent immigrant in the United States, combined with commuting costs and her hourly wages, that neither she nor her labor was valued. In her capacity as a service worker, Mr. Goldstein may have valued her more than she’d ever been valued in a workplace. The necessity of contributing to the financial upkeep of the household, meant that being docked an hour due to lateness from the multiple busses she took across town to get to Mr. Goldstein, could translate to lost wages—wages not contributed to Prayerful’s minor children, nor with helping her husband to pay rent and utilities for their two bedroom South Bronx apartment. If Mr. Goldstein had not died, Prayerful would have most likely stayed, but for other Afro-Caribbean women who are not valued by their employers for their skills and contributions, these women create value by leaving positions that are not for them, and more significantly, they create value by reaching back to the Caribbean to the identities they held before they came to the United States. As the women stretch across space and time, they latch on to the religious values they were brought up with and the values they were raised with as girls, these memories and identities are intrinsic to the kinds of women they would become, and serve as welcome reminders as to who they really are.
Enough Disrespect! Finding Value in Leaving

For the participants in this study, finding employers who value their labor is just as essential as finding a job in itself. When one has employers who do not value the women or the services they perform, the phrase a means to an end, takes on a completely different meaning. A means to an end working for an employer who lacks compassion and kindness means that Afro-Caribbean women will suffer, endure, and tolerate intolerable conditions knowing that it is only for a time, but that time often passes at a painstakingly slow pace. One’s ability to withstand less than favorable working conditions means that the Afro-Caribbean participants always had to keep their end goals in sight. Sometimes, the decision to leave a disrespectful employer was attached to the women obtaining their immigration papers. Having these documents gave some undocumented Afro-Caribbean women the freedom to move on knowing that they had additional employment options in the service sector’s formal economy regardless of their decision to go back to school to obtain degrees accredited by the United States. Evangelical, 55 year old from Dominica opted to continue working in the service sector because of the genuine love she has for children. She can obtain a job outside of the service sector and in fact worked as an administrator for several years after she obtained her green card, but lost her job in the most recent economic recession in 2008. With no job prospects in the formal economy on the horizon neither in South Carolina nor New York, Evangelical took a job as a nanny. Since then, Evangelical has worked as a live-nanny in Westchester and has commuted to the Bronx on the weekends to stay with family to cut costs, calling the Bronx her second home.

With the exception of former nanny Faithful Steward, a Jamaican in her 60s who received her immigration papers through sponsorship, but also felt a calling to remain a nanny instead of returning her past career as a teacher, Evangelical is the only other participant who has
chosen to take care of children for a living. However, her reasons for doing so reveal that the conditions and circumstances for good local economies are regional and vary vastly across the United States. Evangelical’s story is quite different from most of the Afro-Caribbean women I interviewed because even though she’s had her papers for the last 15 years, Evangelical still works as nanny in the Northeast, sometimes taking jobs in Westchester, New York, Boston and Connecticut. Evangelical has a son and a husband who live in the South, but due to the poor economy in the South and the lack of job prospects, Evangelical travels up North to work as a nanny for a Jewish family living in Scarsdale, a suburb in lower Westchester.\(^{150}\) The job was intended to be long term, but after four months things have not worked out. While the family agreed to pay her travel expenses for the day and a half she gets off from Sunday to Monday afternoon, they refused to pay her travel expenses and instead nickeled and dimed her claiming she owed them $15. Instead of sticking it out and staying there to support her son who is in college, Evangelical informed me she’s leaving and not giving them notice, opting instead to remove her belongings.

The ice that broke the camel’s back was not their refusal to allow Evangelical to bring one meal her sister prepared for her into the home citing that it wasn’t Shaker Kosher, or that she was underpaid and overworked, or was hired to be a nanny but was being used as a housekeeper and nanny, but the final straw was that she injured her finger and her employers showed no care or regard for her finger which subsequently developed an infection. According to Evangelical, her employers were more concerned about the work she was doing for them, instead of giving

\(^{150}\) Additional research is needed to explore the regional differences in wages for service workers. Many Afro-Caribbeans have fled to the South due to lower costs of living and a slower pace of life. Unfortunately, the lower salaries may put them at an economic disadvantage, and many who fled to Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas have returned to the Northeast for better wages, and better post-retirement benefits.
her a few days off to rest and fully heal. Evangelical shared her frustration and testimony of deliverance from that live-in job after being told to clean every radiator and base board in the multi-level five-bedroom house. Evangelical said she did what was asked even though her finger still wasn’t healed, but that she had had enough with her employer’s complete disregard and disrespect.

“These people, these Jews are supposed to be religious and know God, but they don’t know God. They don’t know him at all because they don’t value me, they don’t value all that I do, and they have no compassion. So I have to listen to my spirit and I not even telling them when I’m leaving. Every weekend for the past month, I’ve been taking home my tings, likkle by likkle so they don’t notice anything. I don’t let them know anything because they are both attorneys and can come up with some nonsense to not pay me, just like they were supposed to pay my commuting costs of $50 each week, but claimed I owed them $15, and I let them deduct it from my pay even though I’ve yet to see one dime of my commuting costs. I don’t say ONE WORD, or ask them anything about it. Friday is my last day and they don’t even know. Let them stay there, I’m going home to no job, but in the same way God took care of me and carry me this far, he will carry me further. Which is why I praise him, so to God be the Glory!”

For Evangelical, her decision to leave her employers in Scarsdale without notice is not uncommon. She decided that she could no longer endure working for a family that supposedly espoused particular religious values but those values did not involve treating Evangelical with compassion.
Similarly, Sophisticated Palava, left her job after being a housekeeper for her former employers for over fifteen years, performing the role of both nanny and housekeeper for the last two years of her employment, sometimes working twelve-fifteen hour days Monday-Friday. Unlike Evangelical, Palava did not just walk away and not look back, she remained in contact with her former employer Jessica, who would call Palava periodically to use Palava as her personal therapist for issues Jessica was having with her husband and kids, to complain about the women working for her after Palava left, and to ask Palava to come back to work. Palava recounted how she finally gave in to Jessica’s repeated invitations for a visit. Since Jessica and her husband had taken Palava out for a thank you dinner after she stopped working them, Palava was in no hurry to go back for a visit. Palava finally agreed to come by for a visit only after deliberately letting her former employers wait several months before accepting the invitation and then Palava brought her husband along so he could see the massive house she had been cleaning and maintaining for so many years.

“You know I work less than 15 minutes away from her now, and every time she calls she asks why I don’t stop by? I keep telling [Jessica] my job does not allow that now. I’m very busy and can’t step away from my job like that, but you know one day I went by on my day off because she invited me and was so insistent. I just sat there and mek she serve. Oh yeah, I had her running back and forth serving me, getting me water, tea, any and everything I wanted, asking for honey after she gave me sugar. [I had her] running back and forth to the kitchen from the living room. Di WHOLE WORKS! Just like she used to do ME! Ah so yu do DEM!
[Before I left that job] I remember her husband asking me if I won’t reconsider staying and if I have a next job. I told him whether mi hav a next job or not, I’m leaving! I give dem six months’ notice fi find somebody else and whether it tek mi nine months or a year to find a next work, mi wasn’t staying. She too damn disrespectful and I wasn’t putting up with it no more! You have a skilled, educated, and proficient person working in yu house and don’t value mi, and choose to disrespect me. Uh uh, mi GONE!!!

[Jessica] kept asking me and then begging me to come back and I take one look around that house, because she have to hire THREE people to do what I used to do, and it still don’t even clean good. And I just laugh and say to her: You don’t expect me to leave my good paying job with benefits to come back and do THIS? Oh NO! It doesn’t work that way! Come back for what? And mi just continue fi mek her serve mi. Hmph! [Afterwards] in the car, my husband looked at me and said, ‘yu know yu is a real bitch! (laughing) Yu hav dese white people ah run up an’ down after yu! Di ‘ooman all ah buss sweat! Bwoy yu good!’ Mi just turn to im an say, ‘ah SO yu do dem! Mek dem see how it feel fi run up and down. Oh yeah, I had a good time, I enjoyed every bit of my tea, bitch dem!’” Schewps (sucking teeth)

Sophisticated Palava’s only chance at retribution against her former employer is to give Jessica back some of the treatment Palava received when Palava once ran herself ragged serving Jessica and her husband and children. The sad reality is that Sophisticated Palava is acutely aware that had she remained in Jamaica, she could’ve continued to live with helpers to assist her in the performance of the social reproductive tasks of her own household. Instead, she opted to give up
her middle-class life and do the work she previously assigned others. True retribution would allow her college degree from Jamaica to be sufficient to gain entry into the white collar sector so that Palava could be at equal footing with her former employer, earning a salary commensurate with her experience. Instead, Palava, like many Afro-Caribbean women before her, transitioned from domestic work into the healthcare field, swapping one service sector job without benefits for another service sector job working with benefits. Sophisticated Palava is fortunate, because many women transition from domestic work to the healthcare field and still don’t have benefits, but they have better pay and access to jobs with benefits—a rare and valuable asset denied them when they were undocumented.

Aside from now having healthcare benefits and the opportunity to start a pension at age fifty-seven, Palava also earns a higher salary assisting the mentally disabled adult population at a facility in Upper Westchester, and she doesn’t have to deal with employers like Jessica. Rather, she contends with disabled adults and their families, along with social workers, occupational therapists, pharmacists, nurses and doctors. This position gives Palava opportunities to display her educational background and share her professional expertise of being a biology and physical education teacher, along with the physical therapy degree Palava almost obtained before her student visa expired almost twenty years ago. In this capacity, Palava draws on her former identities as a professional by sharing her knowledge and understanding of the human anatomy and it’s response to certain pharmaceutical drugs. In this capacity, her knowledge and experience is valued, and while her salary isn’t great, it’s an opportunity to cultivate financial security for a woman less than ten years away from retirement.

This pipeline from the private spaces of employer’s homes, to the public spaces in healthcare facilities, allows Sophisticated Palava to be counted and her presence acknowledged.
simply because she is on the books, being counted, and is therefore now eligible to receive social security benefits. The mere fact that Palava now has benefits and no longer has to rely on a network of physicians and pharmacies, counts for something, but Palava makes every effort to still go to the physicians who assisted her when she had no papers. Unlike most people, Palava is cognizant that her doctors are running a business too. “Many people don’t realize that although they are doctors they have a mortgage to pay, college tuition to pay, rent for the office to pay, salaries for the nurses and secretary to pay, plus malpractice insurance, and in some cases student loans. Many people just come in these places plop right down and think just because is doctor they have it. No, no, no no, you have to have compassion man! Damnit after all, these doctors are people too!” The level compassion that Palava has towards her physicians reveals a deeper understanding of how businesses are structured, and how people should be valued and treated. Perhaps the compassion that Palava demonstrates towards her physicians is the same level of compassion that she wishes was given to her by some of her former employers. It is not just compassion that Palava is speaking about, but the acknowledgement that appearances are not what they seem. That people draw conclusions about others based on appearances, and are not aware of the challenges that those individuals face. Palava lives in a very nice neighborhood in Lower Westchester and drives a high end luxury vehicle but looking at her from the outside, Palava says, “no one knows di struggle weh mi ah go through right now because I don’t share my business with any and everybody. Imagine no one knew for YEARS seh mi clean house and tek care of kids. I’m very unassuming, that’s me.”

The art of keeping up appearances for Sophisticated Palava is one of survival during her almost 20 years living as an undocumented immigrant in New York. She is also acutely aware that when she didn’t have her papers that she was and is not the only one who performs.
Sophisticated Palava knows that her doctors are stressed which is why she still values the services they provided her at reduced rates, because they didn’t have to charge her less, but they did. Palava also revealed that many times she and her physicians would talk for upwards of an hour at the end of a long day. When she was sick, but still had to go to work, she opted to take the last appointment for the day and with full knowledge that all doctors run late, if Palava arrived at 7 p.m. she could still be seen, engage in good conversation and still get quality care without having to sit in an emergency room for several hours like most people including the millions of undocumented immigrants who still do not have access to affordable healthcare.

Palava’s ability to recognize that her documented physicians perform for their patients by not revealing all the life stressors physicians must contend with, means that she is able to see herself beyond her status as an undocumented worker, but rather through a broader lens. Palava goes through life fully aware that everyone is dealing with some level of difficulty and that her life challenges while unique to Palava’s specific circumstances, she does not see herself as alone. Although her path has felt quite lonely at times, Palava knows she’s not the only one going through it, and no matter how hard things get she will survive.

What Evangelical and Palava’s stories symbolize is the power of resilience and the power to survive and endure. Their experiences also highlight the conditional aspects of domestic work that is different from the narratives of oppression and resistance prevalent in domestic worker scholarship. These two Afro-Caribbean women demonstrate the power of agency, not because they saw themselves as slaves and oppressed workers and decided to resist, but more so because they saw themselves as women, and were choosing to value themselves and their skills highly. The agency these women exercised was very much like the agency exercised in earlier chapters.
by other Afro-Caribbean women working in the service sector, and it began with internal conversations with themselves about who they really are, and the treatment they deserve.

This more nuanced engagement provides a more intimate understanding of the mental and emotional toll working in the service sector has on Afro-Caribbean women whether they are documented or not. It also provides a closer look into the inner workings of their lives to learn who they are as women, and the reasoning behind the choices they make. Global and regional (local) economic circumstances may have forced them to take these positions in the service sector working as domestics, but those same circumstances weren’t forcing them to stay in positions where they weren’t being valued and disrespected. Albeit for Sophisticated, she gave up three other positions to in order work for Jessica for 2 years of their 15 year relationship. During those two years, Sophisticated worked in the capacity as nanny, housecleaner, dog walker, and domestic cooking Jessica’s family’s meals each night and the children’s breakfast each morning before driving four children to three different schools but her financial situation wasn’t secure enough for her to give up her other two cleaning positions. During Palava’s nine months of underemployment those two other cleaning positions helped Palava and her husband stay afloat until she found a position in the healthcare sector working with disabled adults. The transition to healthcare for Sophisticated Palava affords her the ability to manage her time better since she no longer has to commute between three to seven jobs per week, but even though she made it to the formal sector obtaining a job with benefits, the process of getting there can be more stressful and have women questioning their decision to come all dis way.

212
Finding a Work: The Challenges of Transitioning into the Formal Sector

Palava’s ability to transition to the formal labor sector and get a job with benefits was not an easy one particularly since her transitional period was very much like other participants’ transition into the healthcare field— it was wrought with anxiety and self-reflection. According to several female Afro-Caribbean participants who were undocumented there is a period when they obtain their temporary working papers, which means they are very close to being documented and are temporarily authorized to live and work in the United States but have yet to obtain their immigration papers. Since the process of becoming documented isn’t over but more advanced they must turn over all of their documentation and forms of identification that lists the names they entered the country under. Turning over all documentation for temporary working papers means that although the women are closer to being documented, they aren’t. This period can take several weeks to months of being without a driver’s license unless they stipulate to immigration officials that they need it for employment purposes.

For Palava, if she didn’t have her driver’s license, it would have been impossible to commute to the three to seven different cleaning positions she had each week during the eighteen years she was undocumented. Some days, Palava traveled to four different jobs each day, driving back and forth from Lower Westchester to Upper Westchester up to three times in one day, putting some serious wear and tear on the four vehicles she’s had to purchase during her time in New York in order to commute to and from work. Aside from gas expenses, the costs

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151 See Appendix A to look at the different towns and municipalities that Palava traveled back and forth from. One typical route for Palava was traveling from Pelham to White Plains or from Yonkers to Ossining and Yorktown. Observers may see domestics in these suburban environments, but people rarely think about the geographical spaces that domestics have to traverse for work. According to Palava one of her friends traveled from Brooklyn to White Plains every day, a commute that was almost 3 hours one-way.
of car repairs over the years has meant that Sophisticated has had to budget her funds wisely and upgrade her car to one with better gas mileage when she could afford to, or when repair expenses exceeded the value of the car. When one of her employers sold their home in Upper Westchester and moved into their other residence in Manhattan to downsize once the employer and her husband became empty nesters. This shift meant that in addition to Palava driving to her other jobs, she now had to take the train into the city from Westchester initially paying for her train fare until she negotiated that they pay for her commuting costs, which they gladly agreed to. Preferring that Palava be the only one to clean their home and do their laundry, they made arrangements for Palava to come into the city every other weekend on Saturdays to clean, cook, and do laundry.

After she quit working for Jessica, the Manhattan job was one of the two positions Palava relied on, but the small income wasn’t sufficient to pay her bills. Luckily for Palava she had an understanding landlord and relied on savings, financial assistance from relatives and friends, and credit cards to stay afloat. Many undocumented and documented Afro-Caribbean women working leave their jobs prematurely, some of their patients die, some are fired or they leave when their employers refuse to renegotiate better working conditions or salaries. Regardless of economic conditions, these Afro-Caribbean women face the same challenges as other women going on the job market in their late forties and fifties, but there are additional challenges for many of these women who had full-fledged careers in the Caribbean 15-20 years ago but must now build a resume that reflects in some cases almost a dozen positions involving housecleaning and domestic work.

One evening, I received a frantic phone call from Sophisticated Palava because she was nervous about being able to find “a work” and said “who is going to hire me and mi can’t even
put together a resume? How much time one smbaddy (somebody) can list doing housework, washing dirty draws, cooking, cleaning, it’s really depressing. Ughh! (crying) I just can’t bear it! To come all dis way, and suffer through soooo much to not find a work. If people weh de here cyan find work, what’s going to happen to me?” At this point, I shifted from ethnographer to niece, daughter, or friend, because Palava is old enough to be one of my aunts, and I had to relay all the personal stories she’d told me, reminding Palava that she’d come too far to give up, because going back is not an option. I also told her that my older sister Charmaine worked in human resources and would look over and do her resume for her. Afterwards, we prayed over her circumstances, and she got off the phone, less frantic but fully cognizant that getting her papers in her late fifties would be another set of challenges she would have to endure.

Checking in on Palava a few days later, I learned what was the cause of her anxiety. When I began data collection almost three years prior, I was handed a flyer while walking in Hell’s Kitchen one day. The flyer advertised a free resume workshop being offered to women who were trying to get a job. The flyer also stated that the program also provided free classes to learn basic computer skills. I was completely unaware that Sophisticated Palava held onto that flyer for almost three years in anticipation of getting her work papers. Since the workshop was on Saturdays, and Palava cleaned in Manhattan on Saturdays for $125 for the day, she planned to attend the workshop in the morning and then walk to her employer’s apartment less than ten blocks away. When I gave Palava the flyer, I told her to call before going to make sure that it wasn’t a scam and was a legitimate program. Palava called almost three years later, and found out the program was still active and legitimate. Palava, excited that she was going to get her resume professionally done and learn computer skills traveled to Manhattan from her home in Lower Westchester, like a child anticipating a new gift.
Although Palava had spoken to the director of the program no less than three times over the course of a month, the director failed to inform Palava that in order to participate one had to be a New York State resident and authorized to work permanently in the United States; essentially all workshop participants had to be documented. Despite going through the final process of documentation, Sophisticated Palava was not documented, and thus could not participate. To top it off, it was raining that day, and the workshop was scheduled between 10 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. With her meager resources, Palava couldn’t afford to go back home to Westchester and come back into the city so she wandered in the rain from store to store until she could start cleaning at 2 p.m. Palava later said that after a while of walking in and out in the rain, she was getting cold and wet, and since she didn’t want to get sick because she had no means to pay her doctor or afford the prescription should she develop bronchitis, she scrounged together some change in her purse to buy a cup of coffee. Palava said she just wanted to start bawling in the coffee shop because of her circumstances, but worried that people might think she was crazy and she couldn’t afford to get arrested while waiting for her permanent working papers and green card, so she sat and cried silently looking out the coffee shop window until it was time for work.

“Imagine, mi come all dis way, and dis is what mi come to, but God is good, when I got to work, Mrs. Schiff had brought home a sandwich so I ate that with a salad, and we sat and talked for an hour or so, and then I got to work. I don’t know how I got home that day, how much laundry mi do or didn’t do, I don’t even know if di blasted clothes did wash properly, I just wanted to get in my bed and curl up underneath the covers and cry. BUT God is good, he promised never to
leave me nor forsake me, and I didn’t come all dis way to give up now. It will get betta, it must get betta, it haffi get betta, because I just cyan give up now.”

Sophisticated Palava’s story is often not reflected when we think of how immigrants become documented and the challenges that arise when trying to find work during the transition period. It’s as if the years spent toiling away wiping shit, cleaning homes, and tending to babies, the women remain partially grounded in the identities they forged in the past, needing those identities to survive as reminders of who they really are. These women traverse space and time to a period when they had occupations that reflected their class positions, and had homes with helpers which were made feasible through their education and hard work. However, in order to not get mired in the precarity of their current circumstances, as these women strive to become documented, they must envision a new way of being. It is hard to do so when you’re doing to same work in which your labor and skills are constantly being undervalued and is diametrically opposed to the woman you were when you decided to migrate, the woman you were when you came, and the woman you’ve grown into.

For so many of the Afro-Caribbean participants it is a reality that is irreconcilable; a contradiction at the precipice of a new reality that brought these women all dis way. Rather than continuing to contend with their current circumstances, the women take a leap of faith and leave their jobs while they wait for their final documentation papers. Many are often out of work anywhere from several weeks to several months, and one participant even revealed that she was unemployed for almost two years while she waited. This period of unemployment is marked with trepidation and excitement, the fear that they can’t get in any trouble because if they do, they can be deported and lose all chances of getting their papers thereby making all their sacrifices for nothing; and the women experience the excitement about what lies ahead. What
kinds of jobs do they want to have? What skills do they have? Should they resume their studies and go back to school or try new careers? Are they too old to embark on certain career paths? Will they have a sense of fulfillment performing their work? And for women of a certain age, will they have enough to put into the system? In their late forties, early to mid-fifties, late fifties to early sixties, will they be able to work long enough for a livable wage to be able to draw a social security check?

These women grapple with a sense of security in ways that most people who are documented take for granted. The challenges of being a woman who is aging is one that all women must deal with, but contending with the forces of immigration and seeking security amidst physical, financial and emotional insecurity is a heavier load to bear and goes deeper than just looking for work. The issue of security will be addressed later, but now the challenges of mobilizing employers will be explored briefly to see the conditions that undocumented and documented women have to contend with in the service sector. A discussion of advocacy efforts by policy directors, grassroots activists and union leaders will provide the backdrop to the forces of obstruction impacting mobilization efforts of both employers and employees. The value in compelling employers and an entire industry to treat workers more humanely is a task that many policy directors and activists within advocacy groups like Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) and A Helping Hand encounter.
The Challenges of Advocacy

Sociologist Tamara Mose Brown in her book on Caribbean childcare providers inaccurately concludes that the lack of worker participation in mobilization efforts is a result of apathy or disinterest, and that ambivalence “reproduces their working conditions.” Brown referenced the challenges in getting more women involved in mobilizing domestics to fight for the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. Ultimately, the Domestic Worker Bills of Rights was passed in New York in 2011, but the question of enforcement and regulation has yet to be addressed. Brown’s oversimplified analysis glosses over the complex nuances that exist in the service sector in New York by ignoring the different realities of working in public versus private spaces for undocumented and documented workers. Additionally, by laying poor working conditions at the feet of domestics, Brown overlooks the structural inequity in the U.S. service sector which allows for immigrant women, poor women, and women of color to sustain the service sector without the women receiving adequate compensation, or having their needs addressed in any substantive manner; anti-unionization efforts and national campaigns against collective bargaining only exacerbate working conditions and further oppress workers who already feel marginalized. Alternatively, by examining the challenges of childcare providers alongside the service workers in the healthcare industry, one realizes that there are many factors which contribute to the lack of worker participation in mobilization efforts, and the domestic worker-healthcare worker pipeline ultimately needs more advocacy.

152 Tamara Mose Brown, Ibid., 154.
While the challenges that childcare providers face may be different than those of healthcare workers, based on my research, the obstacles that female service workers encounter must never be limited to oversimplified explanations, but must explored within the many facets that incorporate their daily lives, notwithstanding the movement of Afro-Caribbean women between private and public spaces during the course of the day when employed in the service sector in New York. The nature of the healthcare industry’s structure facilitates worker non-participation, mainly because the labor structure in the United States does not provide a livable wage for its workers, and the women’s backs upon whom the healthcare industry has long since functioned bears additional burdens that create challenges for women to advocate for themselves in ways that would facilitate significant change for fear of reprisals.

In an interview with Carol Rodat, the New York policy director for PHI (Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute), Ms. Rodat discussed the challenges of mobilizing workers: “One of the biggest problems is that the women who work in this workforce do not know what their rights are, and we don’t know how to reach them is the other part of it, because they don’t have computer access. You know they’re out working most of the day, there’s no place that they regularly attend where they’re going to get information on what they should be paid or what the workplace rules are. I think they get taken advantage of quite a bit.” Ms. Rodat accurately assesses that a lack of awareness is a major problem with mobilizing workers, not apathy as Brown concludes. If Ms. Rodat is able to make this assessment based on documented workers, one can only imagine the obstacles undocumented workers face. During more than 2 ½ years of data collection it is evident that networks exist among Afro-Caribbean women to obtain work and gain access to physicians and medical professionals who are willing to provide services to patients off the books. Alternatively, it is also evident that Afro-Caribbean women who utilize
said networks do so to facilitate their survival as undocumented workers. This reality is very
different from participating in advocacy and mobilization efforts which may bring unwanted
attention to women who are trying to bring as little attention to themselves as possible as they try
to get their papers. Additionally, their undocumented status basically guarantees that employers
do not have to adhere to labor laws because there are no agencies or policies in place to enforce
them.

With many undocumented and documented workers in the healthcare sector working in
private homes, unionized documented workers are fortunate to contact their union representative
to report any issues; but for most of the undocumented women who are not unionized, reports of
workplace violence or abuse often go unreported due to fear of reprisals from the agencies or
employers. According to G.L. Tyler, policy director for the union DC 1707, even unionized
homecare workers are reluctant to report abuse. During an interview at DC 1701’s headquarters,
Mr. Tyler mentioned a case several years ago of a worker who was sexually assaulted on the job
by her client and was fired when she reported the incident to the agency. When she went to the
union, she received the support she needed, but her husband left her accusing her of somehow
doing something to provoke the attack. Ultimately this woman was left without a job and a
husband. G.L. Tyler noted that these cases occur infrequently because the union provides
trainings and workshops on workplace violence to equip their mostly female membership with
knowledge of their rights. Mr. Tyler admitted that:

“women become more vulnerable to such attacks because they are working in
private spaces, so a lot of the protections afforded women working in facilities are
simply not present in a client’s home. In the few instances in which women
choose not to join the union and something unfortunate happens, we cannot
protect them. The goal is that women and all the workers know that they have
rights and protections, and they don’t have to be violated to see the value in being
a union member.”
The constant negotiation between public and private spaces in the service sector continues to occur for women of color and Caribbean women in particular because the decision to elevate themselves from years of domestic work and transition to the healthcare sector once they become documented, means that Caribbean women (Afro-Caribbean and Latinas) face another set of obstacles grappling with vulnerability and invisibility in the healthcare sector as these women try to work to attain financial security and accrue social security.

If these are the challenges that documented workers face, one can imagine the potential dangers that undocumented women encounter with no mechanisms in place to monitor the abusive, illegal and unethical treatment by employers or clients. Jovial, a Jamaican certified nurse’s aide, worked for a private hospital in New York, which actively engages in union busting tactics. Jovial found that even as a full time employee, it was hard for her to make ends meet, so she signed up with several agencies to work as a home health aide to supplement her income. On a weekly basis she navigated from the private hospital space to the private spaces in patient’s/client’s homes, feeling that in all the settings in which she worked she had no protections. Jovial was overworked from being given a lot of patients to care for in the hospital, and in the private homes, she had to deal with difficult patients. “It’s either yu tek it or yu leave it, and because I don’t have my G.E.D., mi only tek but so much. Dammit after all! Mi name nuh donkey, I come to this country for a better life, not to tek shit, no matter how much shit I have to clean. It’s only for a time and soon I will walk away leaving all these jobs once I get my G.E.D. then the hospital and the agencies can kiss mi ass!”

Jovial’s comments demonstrate that despite being a documented worker, there are disadvantages of being a documented healthcare worker because exploitation can occur in any
setting. Her experiences also reflect the challenges to obtaining job security without a high school diploma. Jovial migrated to the United States legally when she was in her late thirties during the 1980s but she has found that being a service worker without a GED in the healthcare sector severely limits her ability to move up the socio-economic ladder. This reality also simultaneously limits her employment options, because she often works multiple jobs to make ends meet and is unable to focus in her GED classes due to over exhaustion from performing in those multiple capacities. Jovial is caught in a space of insecurity in that her lack of education creates job insecurity and in working in multiple spaces, she is physically insecure, but her health is also at risk due to the stress of working so many long hours and commuting between those different positions. The real shame is that the healthcare industry doesn’t provide better mechanisms for women to obtain certifications equivalent to the GED based on the multiple hours worked. Women are contributing to an industry in which they receive far less than what they put out. It is truly astonishing that a healthcare sector that is so reliant on female labor to function, that more regulations are not in place to ensure that women’s bodies are protected at all costs in all the spaces they work and maintain.

The inability of many healthcare providers to value their majority female staff is often inaccurately reduced to a supply and demand model. Many healthcare providers do not see the healthcare industry’s growth slowing down any time soon, so the notion that there will always be a demand for workers and a steady supply of workers to fill that demand is quite prevalent. Carol Rodat, in her capacity as a policy director, regularly works with providers and claims that approaching the industry with the attitude that there will always be a supply of workers to draw from comes at a cost.
“Yes, there have been changes, some of which we have been involved in creating. Healthcare is still the number one [sector] driving the economy in New York City, and within the healthcare sector the number one job is that of being a homecare aide. That hasn’t changed. The wages have gotten better, but there have been other policies that have been implemented, that despite the fact that their intention is good, they may in the long run have unintended negative consequences. You know workforce development is extremely complicated and complex and it is not well organized in any state that I know of. It is not well funded, it’s better funded in New York and New York City, but there’s been an underlying philosophy in the industry of homecare that these workers are replaceable and that all you have to do is keep running training programs and fill them up and send them out. And that actually is not true, it creates a very unstable environment and it’s certainly not good for the patients and not good for the workers.”

One can surmise that an unstable environment which lacks adequate workforce development is one that is rife with constant rollover and a reduced standard of care for its patients. Consequently, these conditions may lead to higher incidents of workplace violence, and worker compensation lawsuits due to injuries on the job. Stable work environments have a workforce that is invested in a standard care because as workers, their contributions are valued and held in high esteem, which translates to a higher standard of care, and fewer injuries because the workers are invested in a healthcare institution that is invested in them. Women who are fortunate enough to find jobs at good institutions hold onto those jobs and are reluctant to leave, ever fearful of the alternative. Kind Spirit, a Jamaican in her early sixties claims her daughter has two jobs, one at the nursing home that Kind Spirit works, Nurturing Valley, and another at Esther Allmans,153 a nursing home approximately a mile away from Nurturing Valley.

“My daughter works in both places, and she love it over at Esther’s. Oh my God! They treat people good over there! They have good food, they treat their workers so good, and the patients over dere is happy. Very, very happy because di

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153 The names of the nursing homes have been changed for privacy purposes.
workers are happy. If you ever see the food the workers get to eat! My God, it is nothing like the dogfood they serve to the patients and workers at Nurturing Valley, because you know over there whatever food they prepare for di patients they prepare for the workers to eat too. Mi dear, di food so good, it can all carry home!”

I asked Kind Spirit why her daughter doesn’t work at Esther Allmans exclusively and she said that her daughter can’t get enough hours there. Clearly, the facility has good workforce development because workers and former patients hold it in high regard. As a researcher and Bronx native, I have known people who have rehabilitated there, in fact one of my neighbors, a retired nurse’s aide, told me “my dear, I’ve stayed in practically all the facilities in di area because you know I had five hip replacements. Esther Allmans is di BEST! My God I felt like a queen!” During the course of my fieldwork I had the opportunity to visit a few family members and family friends at different nursing homes and rehabilitation homes in the Northeast Bronx. I ended up visiting Esther Allmans because my nieces’ dance recitals were held there one year, and I was quite surprised how happy and pleasant the workers and patients looked. Granted, I did not venture beyond the first floor, so I have no idea what the work environment really looks like on the floors, but having visited several facilities in my personal time, I could see why Kind Spirit holds Esther Allmans in such high regard. Many healthcare facilities have high turnover rates, but according to Kind Spirit, high turnover has never been Esther Allmans issue.

“Di problem with Esther Allmans is once di workers get in dere, they don’t wanna leave. All like me, been waiting 10 years to work at that place but I never get call to work there no matter how many time I apply. Maybe they don’t want nobody old like me working there I don’t know, but I do think is something that so
many people don’t wanna leave, dem all retire dere. Woooie! Mi hear even when
di worker dem reach retirement age they don’t wanna leave because di treatment
so good! Sake of dat, my daughter can’t get enough full time hours dere, so she
have to work at my place-Nurturing Valley-di place I work, even though her pay
at Esther Allmans is higher dere.

It’s the Jews, that’s the difference. The Jews know how to treat their
workers right. Uh huh! Even when I come to dis country doing housework and
minding baby, I work fi di Jews and never have any problem with dem. Neva! I
don’t understand why Black people cyan come together and own tings like di
Jews dem, we woulda reach further, much much further...”

Kind Spirit’s mindset not only speaks to good workforce development but she has tied her
positive experiences of working for Jewish people in the past to a critique of Black uplift in the
United States. While Kind Spirit extols the virtue of Esther Allmans she is missing the fact that
her daughter has worked there part-time for ten years, and if Esther Allmans was indeed a
reputable institution that valued its workers, then Kind Spirit’s daughter would have been a full
time employee by now, and would have the ability of other workers to retire there, instead of
working two part-time jobs as a nurse’s aide.

Throughout this research the participants have had varying experiences working with
Jewish employers and their relationships are complex but ultimately these employer-employee
dynamics can be simply understood in terms of value. Not all of the women worked for Jewish
employers many had white employers as well, including ethnic whites like Italians, along with
employers who were second and third generation white European immigrants. If the women
worked in private or public spaces as domestics or healthcare workers, and felt they were valued as women and were appreciated for the skills and expertise provided when performing their jobs, then their assessment of Jewish employers was positive. If the Afro-Caribbean women had negative experiences meaning they did not feel valued or respected, then their assessment of their employers Jewish or non-Jewish was negative. As Sophisticated Palava succinctly noted, “you have Jews and you have JEWS!” implying that the employers who valued and treated their employees with compassion, were Jewish people who lived up to the religious tenets they subscribe to.

Conversely, according to participants, Jewish people who performed their religiosity and did not abide by any of the religious tenets in their treatment of their employees were not real Jews. Sophisticated Palava told me that during a nasty exchange with her former employer Jessica regarding Palava’s request to leave early one day a week because she is a deacon in her church and on the church choir, Jessica questioned Palava’s sincerity, and wondered if she were really going to church. And according to Palava, Jessica asked why Palava had to go to church because Palava’s early departure once a week would mean that the stay at home mother would have to prepare dinner for her own children. Palava claims that she told Jessica:

“You see you people only seek redemption once or twice a year, which is why you feel you can treat people like shit, because when your year is done the slate is wiped clean. Uh Uh, I have an ALL YEAR ‘round God which means I have to treat people good ALL YEAR round because my salvation depends on it. I take my role as Christian steward seriously, which means I serve God, I serve people. Yu tink yu noh God because yu name Jew? A lot of you look down on Black people because you think you know God better than everybody else. Yu nuh
KNOW God, talk to ME about God, talk to Black people about God, and WE can tell YOU about God! You wanna dock mi pay, go ahead, pay or don’t pay mi, because no one is coming in between me and my Jesus. After all di crap weh mi put up with all week no job is gonna deny mi my salvation.” Mi just kiss mi teeth and leave her right there! Damn bastards, making a mockery of religion. Damn disgusting!”

Embedded in Sophisticated Palava’s remarks is a strong critique of the performance of religiosity, but what is also evident is that Palava is addressing the ways that Blacks in America are placed in a racialized hierarchy, and are often judged and relegated to lowest ranks of that hierarchy simply due to their Blackness. Palava is also speaking to the meaningful and tangible ways that Christianity and the Black church provide a space of solace and comfort for Black women particularly since their stress levels are so high due to the intersectional challenges they must contend with on a daily basis. Palava is also addressing the harsh circumstances that Blacks in the diaspora have to endure because that endurance symbolizes their ability to survive with faith. Sophisticated Palava was working three domestic jobs at the time, going to choir rehearsal and visiting the sick and shut in once a week as part of her duties as a deacon providing refuge and healing in her service to others. While her new job hours in the healthcare sector limits her participation on the choir, Palava has managed to arrange her schedule on the days that she has choir rehearsal to come in earlier, in addition to working an extra hour another day to cover her missed time. She can’t make every choir rehearsal but she tries to make some rehearsals. Palava is still a deacon, and uses the limited free time she has on the weekends to participate in church activities, thereby continuing her work as a steward, while also giving back to her community.
Afro-Caribbean Women, ‘The Calling’, and the Paradoxes of Mobilizing around Religion

Although I have an abundance of ethnographic material on Afro-Caribbean participants’ relationship with the church, time and space do not allow for a more in depth analysis of the role of religion and the Black church in the lives of these Afro-Caribbean women. Over the course of more than 2 ½ years of fieldwork, I made it a point to attend church functions like banquets, bake sales, gospel concerts, church picnics and harvest suppers, contributing with my time and limited resources. As an avid baker, I would also contribute cakes and desserts in addition to volunteering my time assisting with various functions. Depending on the church, I became known for certain desserts, with each of the three churches I volunteered, catering to the different cultural preferences of each church. One church was small and comprised of mostly Afro-Caribbean people, another was a medium sized church that had a diversity of members, but had a sizeable Afro-Caribbean congregation, and the last church a large one, comprised mostly of African Americans and second and third-generation Caribbeans and Africans. I saw these volunteer opportunities as my way of giving back to some of the participant’s churches, mainly because so many of these women were generous with their time and sharing their personal histories with me. Unlike most scholarship on domestics that just mention that women attend church, I felt it was necessary to intervene and briefly highlight the significant role that religion plays in the lives of Afro-Caribbean women, particularly those working in the service sector.

Christianity specifically provides a space for many of these women to continue their stewardship that was cultivated when they were children in the Caribbean, and continued to be an integral part of their lives as adults before they migrated to New York. Their religious beliefs and activities cannot be simply reduced to creating spaces of refuge, but for many women it is
what has ordered their lives here in the United States whether they are undocumented or not. The choice to abide by certain Christian values is a result of these Afro-Caribbean women having once been Afro-Caribbean girls who were raised in Caribbean societies in which Christianity, introduced by colonialism plays an integral role in the daily activities of Afro-Caribbean people. In many Caribbean countries one can find church activities on every day of the week because it is vital to the structure of the community, particularly in rural or country areas of the Caribbean.

Attending different Black churches in the Northeast Bronx, allowed me to see how essential Christianity is to lives of many women working in the service sector. While conducting fieldwork, I would often find Afro-Caribbean women who were raised in one denomination, but practiced a different denomination post-migration. If one spends enough time around female Afro-Caribbean, African American, and African church goers, you find that there is a mélange of Christian hymns and songs that they draw from to sing or hum during the course of the day for solace and comfort because of their multi-denomination church experiences. It is also not uncommon to find a few participants who attend upwards of three or four different churches of different denominations on their days off, to get the spiritual sustenance they desire. Some women managed to fit in two or three churches on a Sunday, but most of them were just glad they could attend church on the one or two Sundays they had off each month. This ability to cobble together a mixture of Black Christian experiences speaks directly to the multi-faceted and nuanced nature of the Black diasporic experience. This intersection of spiritual development and the Black diaspora becomes even more complex when gendered labor is incorporated into the discussion. For many women like Distant Mother, a college student and companion, she looked forward to going to church on her only morning off, “to get prayed up to deal with the week.
Massa, I have to be prayed up and just wash myself in the spirit, if I don’t, I feel like I would die, because it’s so hard, and dealing with these old people and their personalities…it’s what I’m called do but it’s not easy. Not easy at all…”

Faithful Steward, a documented Jamaican woman who is also a pastor and choir member attends church weekly, and has said that she was called to take care of the less fortunate and needy. “It was what I placed on this earth to do. It is who I am and it is my gift from God to leave a positive imprint on the little souls I am blessed to work with. It’s why I became a teacher in Jamaica, it’s my gift.” Faithful Steward, like Evangelical received her papers years ago and continued working as a nanny over the years helping her husband to send both their children to college. Blessing, an undocumented Dominican woman who attends church infrequently, feels that taking care of children is her gift. Both women referred to their roles as nannies as “their calling.” Blessing relayed to me that even though she was a business owner in Dominica, that:

“Taking care of kids is what I was called to do! I used to have help back home with my two older daughters, but I would just keep them with me while I was working [in my shop] and watch other people’s kids too. If I didn’t watch kids for a living, I don’t know what I would do, because God put me here on this earth to do that. Anybody can run a business, but not everyone is gifted to be able to put their hands on a child and help and bless that child while they are growing. THAT is my gift! I just love kids, all kids, even when dey parents claim dey give trouble I can speak to them and instruct them, and dey doesn’t give mi any problem. I was born fo dat!”
When I first began interviewing participants, I was under the impression that performing domestic work was just a means to an end for all Afro-Caribbean women. I was surprised to learn that a few women sincerely felt that providing for children was a calling, and their entry into the labor market through domestic work wasn’t a continuation of continued exploitation of Caribbean women but was a part of their destiny that began with performing charitable work in the community through the churches they grew up in. I interviewed more than thirty participants for this study, but had interactions and conversations with at least seventy-five women during my data collection. I also attended more than a dozen church events, and there was not one church event that I attended or volunteered for in which an Afro-Caribbean, African-American, or African woman wasn’t rushing in from her job or going to her job as a certified nurse’s aide, home health aide or companion to drop off something for the church event.

The women brought trays of fried escovitch fish, a cake or cakes, pots or pans of rice and peas, or pots of curried goat, stewed chicken, fried chicken, oxtail or salad. These women would often rush in exclaiming how tired they were from cooking all night so they could go to work in the morning, or cooking all morning after a working the night shift, and were dropping off food to go to work again from 3p-11pm and perhaps overtime on barely a few hours of rest. What seemed to me a huge sacrifice of one’s time and resources, these women contributed to their churches and communities as a normal part of what they do as women of color. Jovial said to me one day, “if there is a need and I have the capacity to do it, I do it because it’s not a sacrifice if God gives you the strength to do it. God made the ultimate sacrifice, so what is a pot of curry chicken and rice and peas? I do for the church and for my grandkid’s schools, I volunteer both places. I fill a need and it makes me happy.” Jovial and other Afro-Caribbean women’s calling allows them to do more for their community, but for a woman like Sophisticated Palava, her
participation in church activities allows her to scrutinize her employer’s religiosity and spirituality.

Returning to Sophisticated Palava’s critique of her employer’s religious activities, one can interpret Palava’s reaction to mean that she clearly felt that as a woman who spent almost twenty years in the United States as an undocumented service worker who earned extra money serving food at seders during Jewish holidays, Palava felt very much entitled to question and critique Jessica’s spirituality because she did not see how Jessica’s spirituality strengthened the community, simply because Jessica is a Jewish woman who doesn’t abide by the religious and spiritual precepts that she puts forth. She’s a Jewish woman but for Palava she’s not Jewish enough to value her employees. Palava does however feel that her own spirituality strengthens and supports not only the Black diasporic religious community she belongs to, but also the homes and spaces in which she works. Prayer and stewardship give Palava the peace to perform her daily duties, but to also pray for the people she works for and the children and now disabled adults she attends to. Palava, noted, “those kinds of Jews like Jessica really nuh know God. So when I’m there, I pray that God sees me through, but I also pray for them and their kids. Dese people are really sick, and I pity them. They have money but their souls are empty even though they claim they’re religious. Pray fi dem yes! Who need prayer more than dem? Sick people!”

For her employers who are atheists, Palava is able to summon up even more pity: “How can you not believe in God? Without him, I wouldn’t be here. When you look at how hard life is how can you not believe in God? And when trouble tek dem, dem holding onto nothing? Nothing at all? Nothing at all? Lawd Jesus! I pray fi dem especially, because they need prayer. We all do. God promised to never leave nor forsake me, and I not leaving him because he’s never left me. I came all dis way and my God and Jesus carried me.” The religious and spiritual
engagement of Afro-Caribbean women goes beyond typical discussions of Black women in America attending the Black church as a space of refuge, the participation in churches provides some refuge for the women, but it also stems from the ways Christianity was introduced through colonialism in the Caribbean and the many ways it continues to order the way of life.

According to Sophisticated Palava’s sister, Distinguished growing up in the country in Jamaica, everybody went to different church activities:

“In the country and rural areas in Jamaica, you went to church. Who didn’t have bazaar, had prayer meeting, had revival, and you went to any and everything. At least that was the case growing up in my days and even when I was raising my kids, you went to church functions. We didn’t have so many social activities as you young people do today. Church was our social function and everyone in the community participated, regardless of your denomination. What else was there to do? I don’t know if it is still the case in Jamaica today, but this was certainly how most country people lived in my day. Your chores are done, you put on your clothes and go to a function. You got to see how other churches did things, learned songs from every denomination and for the most part, because it involved the community, everyone had a nice time…Well I don’t know about everyone else, but I most certainly did!”

This community engagement in the church is an aspect of Caribbean culture that many of my participants carried with them when they migrated to New York. Distinguished is not a service worker, and did not enter the labor market via the service sector, but chose to briefly continue her career in teaching before entering the business sector. While she chose to leave the
education sector, she remained tied to the church, visiting and participating in many church activities at different churches until she found a suitable home church with a majority Caribbean congregation.

What her comments reveal is that church played an integral role in the daily lives of Afro-Caribbean women to the extent that women like Sophisticated Palava, Grace, Evangelical, Faithful Steward, Prayerful, Charity, Jovial, Distant Mother, Kind Spirit among others, all made a concerted effort to maintain their church participation despite their work schedules in the service sector. Even if they only attended church on the one weekend they had off per month if they worked in healthcare sector, or if they attended church on the one day they had off all week if they worked as a domestic and childcare provider, they made the time to attend church and participate in church activities. This attention to one’s spiritual and community development plays such an integral role in the many identities these women inhabit, yet in terms of the mobilization efforts by activists, grassroots organizations and unions, Afro-Caribbean women are never engaged in the spaces in which they worship. I did not find evidence of mobilization efforts in any of the four churches I visited during almost 3 years of ethnographic fieldwork in the Northeast Bronx.

This absence reveals a distinct challenge to how Afro-Caribbean domestics are seen and engaged versus the mobilization efforts by groups like Helping Hand (HH) and JFREJ whose efforts are directed towards employers. According to Sue Lob an activist with Helping Hand, the organization frequently collaborates with JFREJ. At the time of our interview, Lob was recently hired as the new campaign organizer/director of the New York chapter. Lob notes, that as a small organization HH she has mainly worked one on one but has been actively reaching out to JFREJ due to their mobilization strategies directed towards employers.
Mostly [because I’m new,] I’ve been doing one on one, but we are reaching out to JFREJ, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice and we really come out of the organizing they did around the [Domestic Worker] Bill of Rights. So JFREJ has been working very intensely in the synagogues, and so that’s a really great model. So to me what’s really nice about the synagogue organizing is that you can have a discussion of values, so the self-interest can be around, “I’m a moral person and I do this because I really care about being in the world in that way.” Which is different than with a kind of general audience, and one of the concerns with some of the groups, is that particularly since they’re based in Park Slope, they don’t want to come across as kind of Park Slope Food Co-op, Vegetarian, we know what’s best for everybody.” So it’s tricky because you want to have a call to action that has a moral imperative, without sounding like you’re being judgmental. So we’ll see how that pans out…”

Embedded in Lob’s comments is the issue of value and the challenges of appealing to an employer’s moral conscience by asking them to do what is right without employers feeling that their morals and values are being scrutinized. By concentrating on employers, Lob is also looking to mobilize them in spaces outside of the synagogue so that expectant parents can have access to resources informing them of what equitable wages should be for employees. All of this is an attempt to prevent future employer-employee conflict. It’s a delicate balance as an organizer to impart the value of domestic labor and treatment of domestics while still leaving space for the employer’s to police themselves. This balance must also convey the importance of paying fair wages to perform social reproductive tasks of a household in a labor sector in which there are no enforcement measures in place to ensure that employers do the right thing. How does one convey the importance of value in terms of an employee’s worth when sometimes the moral values of employers are dissonant with the value women working as domestics place on themselves?
One day I asked Sophisticated Palava if she’d heard of JFREJ and if she attended any of their workshops, since at the time she worked in Lower and Upper Westchester and quite of a few of her employers were Jewish. Palava replied, “No sah! Not ME! Uh uh! I know they put on workshops for people who look after kids, but I don’t pay them any mind because those things are for Mexicans, Spanish from Latin America what you call dem? La…La…Latinos? Not me, those workshops are for people… who are oppressed…those Spanish women who are exploited. That’s not me!” I asked Palava what she meant by oppressed and exploited, and she said:

“Those poor women get these jobs to work for these low class, no, NO CLASS Jews and white people and because the employers know these poor women just come, they barely speak English, the employers take advantage of them, give them low wages and exploit them. I feel sooo sorry for them. Just based on the way I talk and carry myself, they [potential employers] know they’re dealing with an educated Jamaican woman, so that shit doesn’t fly with me! Come again!”

Sophisticated Palava, fully cognizant of the myriad ways that employers racialize workers, engages in racialization of newly emigrated Latinas; and also racializes herself, subverting the power dynamic inherent in racialized hierarchies of non-whites by whites to signal to potential employers in wage negotiations that her identity as an educated Jamaican woman excludes Palava from having to take certain jobs because her class status in Jamaica. Similarly, Palava’s refusal to refer to herself or Latinas performing childcare in Westchester as nannies or domestics, means that the titles themselves are incompatible with the identities Palava holds, and therefore she’s also not placing those identities on anyone else in her position, not even the Latinas she feels sorry for.
Palava carried her class status with her along with her college degree, and although she was undocumented when she made these comments, Palava, after performing domestic work for almost 20 years feels, embodies, and performs her identity by staking claim to a higher level in the domestic-healthcare service sector hierarchy. Palava deliberately avoided participating in workshops that JFREJ offered over the years because she did not perceive herself as occupying an oppressed and exploited class and social status. What Palava’s remarks also reveal is that while JFREJ actively mobilizes employers in Westchester, Palava casts not only Latinas in a negative light but the Jewish and white employers who exploit workers by not treating them equitably. Her comments are exceptionally damning because she regards exploitive employers as having no class, meaning the employers are completely devoid of all moral, ethical, and social values because they actively engage in unfair labor practices. Hidden in her condemnation of employers is also a judgment that if an employer participates in JFREJ’s workshops they somehow inherently lack the morals and values to pay workers equitably to perform social reproductive tasks that they employers themselves don’t want to do for their own children in their own homes.154 Sophisticated Palava’s loaded comments are not just reserved for employers but for the Latinas who actually perform domestic work and attend JFREJ’s workshops.

Palava’s compassion for Latinas by calling them poor, means that not only is Palava cognizant that as immigrants from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Latin America many of these women are left with poor job options within the service sector solely because they do not

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154 Based on discussions with Sue Lob, sometimes employers genuinely don’t know what a fair and equitable salary is for their nannies. Apparently this is the case for new parents who may not have friends with children or have childcare networks to draw on for information. When I attended my first domestic worker’s mobilization event at Barnard years ago, I too was surprised that employers needed organizations to provide workshops on how to treat their employees. After further research, I realized that not all employers are exploitive and some of them really do want to do the right thing by their employees, but depending on the class position of the employer it’s just not financially feasible.
have a good command of English, but it makes them more vulnerable to exploitation. Palava’s logic might suggest that even if the women are educated, the language barrier prevents the women from being able to perform their identities in their full capacity with complexity and nuances. Conversely, what Palava’s logic overlooks is the complex realities of Latinas working as domestics, and that for employers who want children to be bilingual Latina domestics can capitalize on language barriers and utilize their language skills as an asset to command higher wages, or setting language aside can engage in multiple performances around their proficiency of domestic work by feigning knowledge of certain tasks. This is what many in the Caribbean refer to as “playing fool to ketch wise” so that all efforts to take advantage of domestics are subverted. Whether one is being racialized in the context of work, or if the women are racializing themselves, the mobilization efforts by JFREJ, DWU, and HH need to take into account the multiple ways that Caribbean women are seen, but more importantly, the multiple ways Caribbean women see themselves.

Meetings and workshops are often held in synagogues to be attentive to the religious activities and spiritual engagement of the employers of domestics, but that same attention is not directed towards Afro-Caribbean women in their spaces of worship. In terms of mobilization efforts there is a disparity between how employers are viewed through a lens of complexity but that same luxury is rarely afforded Afro-Caribbean women and Caribbean women in general. Hence, Afro-Caribbean women are viewed through a narrow monolithic lens that captures only a fraction of their lives and identities—that of worker. It is the equivalent of looking at an eclipse of the sun through a homemade viewer, only a sliver of light peers through a hole, masking the fullness and richness of their lives by not seeing the women in their entirety.
The issue of security is something that all women working in the service sector must contend with. Charity, a recently retired maintenance worker at a prestigious Ivy League institution in New York City was “desperate” to join a union as a result of experiences of racism and being negatively racialized. In the 25 years she worked at the college she said all efforts to start a union by her colleagues were met with union busting measures that included demotion, termination, and other punitive actions by the university administration. For unionized Afro-Caribbean women in my study working in healthcare they see their unions as ineffective in actually providing redress for members. One participant, Compassion discussed the dangerous patients that were being admitted to the nursing home where she works, many of whom are dangerous felons, drug addicts, and violent psychiatric patients all of whom she was never trained to work with. Compassion said that as she leaves her house she prays until she returns home, because after being threatened by patients several times she felt that prayer was her only recourse, so she could come home to her family safely at night. When asked if she filed a report with the union and if the union was supportive or advocating on behalf of its workers. Compassion replied “Schewps (sucking of teeth), what they gonna do? They don’t care [referring to the nursing home], they make their arrangements already, and you have one little Puerto Rican man downstairs to defend us? He have his family to worry about too.” I asked what union she belonged to and if she knew who her union steward was. She said she belonged to 1199 one of the largest unions in New York City but despite their size the union and its representation is deemed ineffectual in her eyes. However Compassion’s experiences speak to the vulnerability of all workers at her job and that essentially collectively or individually they
feel they have no power. It also speaks volumes about the growing healthcare industry in which
women of color and immigrant women hold many of the positions in this sector. Recently
retired Prayerful worked as a certified nurse’s aide in both Connecticut and the Bronx, and felt
that 1199’s union advocacy efforts and benefits vary state to state:

“I was unionized 1199 [in Connecticut] but I think their 1199 is no good, I think
New York 1199 is much better. Dem nuh try fi fight for us, you noh? Whatever
the job say, they just go with it, and don’t fight for us. 1199 Connecticut is no
good. I’ve been there 12 years, and just a couple of months after I go there the
union come into dat place. They didn’t have any union, a couple of months after I
go dere, de union come in. And now I retire, and they gwain mek mi know that
one month after I retire, everything cut off, like mi medical and everyting. Den yu
cyan call dem good? Schewps (kissing her teeth) One month after mi retire? So mi
can join cobra, and pay $500 a month? Whe mi fi get money from? So everyting
cut off.

And then I go ah di social security and apply for di part B, di one whe yu
can see the doctor, but all NOW I don’t have prescription coverage. Just last
week I had to pay outta pocket fi mi prescription. I don’t have it, and Social
Security say I must apply for di Part D fi di prescription part, but I have di letter
right here, it just come today and dem deny mi. Saying that what mi husband take
home from his social security and mine, mi over di limit. Fi work so hard, and
not even dat. And to know dat di people who don’t work get everyting. Dem get
Medicaid, dem get SSI, food stamps, dem get everything. It’s terrible!”
To pay into the system and get very little back is not only insulting, it puts retirees at an economic disadvantage. Historically in the U.S., agricultural workers and domestic workers were left out of social security. The undocumented domestics in my study, many of whom are no different from Palava, are desperate to “pay into de system” so that they can draw a check years from now. Grace, a Jamaican in her 50s took a job as a school teacher after she received her papers, not because of the pay, but because she wanted to “pay into de system.” Working as a domestic, Grace actually earned more than twice what she earns currently teaching at an independent school, and it’s because she’s looking to secure her future. Blessing, a Dominican in her 50s, who recently received her papers after ten years told me that she’s ready to leave her live-in nanny job because she wants to “pay into de system.” Blessing said to me, “Christine, ALL I need is $300 a month to live on in Dominica. Chile, with $100 a month in Dominica I good! With $300 a month, Gurl, I SET!”

For newly documented women who have no plans to return home to the Caribbean to live, they will barely be able to live on $300 a month with the rising costs of living. In terms of the history of domestics and their relationship to social security, when it wasn’t the state denying them benefits, it then became the employer, with employers either refusing to withdraw benefits on worker’s behalf or choosing not to. Afro-Caribbean women must contend with all of these hierarchies and the structure of work itself in this nation both of which deny them the ability to put into the system. This means as newly documented workers they may have to work much longer than they initially anticipated. They fought so hard to come to this country, survive here and entered the service sector pipeline all in the hopes of securing their future. Little did they know that to come all dis way, means finding a new way of being here.
Conclusion: A Means to an End: Was it Worth it?

“Was it worth it?” Regardless of the Afro-Caribbean woman’s immigration status, the responses always began with contemplative silence, some followed by heavy sighs, others with bitter laughter before they uttered one word. Their responses elucidate the importance of migration narratives and the reality of circumstances that defy the reasons that brought them to New York. These contemplative silences are also indicative of the sacrifices of Afro-Caribbean women coming “all dis way” across the Caribbean ocean to inhabit new Caribbean spaces in New York, all while carrying the former identities created back home. These are the narratives that do not get told in domestic work and service work scholarship on Afro-Caribbean women.

The ends for many of these women began with not just getting their papers, but with the visions and dreams of the lives they would lead once they had their papers. Some of those dreams ranged from being able to buy houses of grandeur to just being able to live without the stress of getting papers. When I spoke to Prayerful, who arrived in the early 1980s with her papers in tow, but only knew a career in the service sector graduating from home health aide to certified nurse’s aide, her success is determined by her off-spring, especially the accomplishment of her daughters, Generous and Kindness separated by 14 years. I sat in Prayerful’s apartment on a hot summer afternoon, the fan created an odd soundtrack to our interview with clicking sounds and whirls alternating between oscillations that pulled warm air from one part of the apartment to the other. Prayerful sat on one end of couch and I on the other, and as she was thinking about her response, she let out a loud chuckle, “He heh” and sucked her teeth, and then rubbed the fingers on her right hand which were swollen from lymphedema caused by a breast cancer diagnosis twenty years prior before smiling and saying:
“I suppose so...Yes! It was worth it. Especially when I think of the children and grandpickney dem...Everyone is healthy, de kids... Generous was able to buy this house, Kindness have a house and Calm de oldest, from him come here im have a good paying job, always work. Scholar im and Kindness have masters degrees.

He heh, yu noh mi just realize dat is the two girls dem have house, and de boy dem nuh have no house. Heh Heh Hehhhhhh! Woooie! I don’t have any favorite but it funny dat de girl dem strive fi dat, and de boy dem...well wha mi fi se? Heh Heh! Dem healthy! All of dem healthy, including mi grandkids dem, even tho dem get pon mi nerves sometimes, I won’t curse God, because all of them are blessings. Every single, last one of dem is a blessing. So yes! It was worth it! God has been good to me!”

Charity, Lady J, and Faithful Steward all felt that their sacrifices were also worth it because of the accomplishments of their children, but more so because their children and grandchildren were healthy. Prayerful’s comments reveal a strange but prevalent contradiction in terms of Afro-Caribbean migration to the United States. Afro-Caribbean women during the 20th century migrated to the United States in higher numbers than Afro-Caribbean men, and for women whether they are documented or not. Despite all the challenges that Black women face in U.S. society, the opportunities for employment and economic uplift are more readily available for Afro-Caribbean women than they are for Afro-Caribbean men, with Afro-Caribbean women enrolling and graduating from college at a higher rate than Afro-Caribbean men.

The other interesting aspect of Prayerful’s life is that as an immigrant Jamaican woman, her daughters have been able to achieve at their age what Prayerful could not achieve in the
United States: the immigrant dream of buying a house. Her oldest daughter, Generous bought her home through many years of performing service work in the retail industry, and her youngest daughter, Kindness purchased her house after a decade of working as an educational specialist. Years ago when Prayerful was toiling away at a sewing machine in a factory in Kingston she never would’ve imagined that her children would turn out to be as successful as they are, back then she only hoped that migrating to the United States would provide a more stable and secure future than if she remained in Jamaica. While she was unable to buy a house, in so many ways Prayerful is representative of the Caribbean immigrant dream. She is a U.S. citizen and was able to build a home in Jamaica during her career in the healthcare industry. Prayerful spends half her time in Jamaica and the other half in New York, and even though she doesn’t have the post-retirement financial security she thought she would have, Prayerful still considers herself very fortunate.

The Jamaican healthcare system is not quite up to Prayerful’s standards so she travels to New York for her doctor’s appointments every few months. This is a common practice among many Jamaicans who return home. One day, Prayerful called me from Jamaica to see how I was doing, and I enquired how she spent her days. Prayerful detailed a list of errands and activities for the small community in the rural parish of St. Elizabeth that I was truly amazed she wasn’t exhausted. I thought to myself: Who spends their entire vacation doing for others? Prayerful did and continues to do so. Prayerful spoke about going to church and spending her days visiting the sick and shut in, buying and preparing food for the elderly and infirm residents. I asked her if she was tired from doing so many things for her church and for the community. Prayerful responded: “No, not at all! I grow in de church and saw my mother and grandmother helping out de ole people dem and de sick and shut in, so I do de same in de Bronx, and I do the same when
I’m home. This is God’s work and if he blessed me wid so much, it’s right to help others whenever I can and wherever there is a need. Who can be tiyad when God gi yu strength? Heh Heeeyyy! (laughing)”.

To follow up with Strong Sacrifice, we met up with each other early in the afternoon and I learned that although she recently got her papers, she did not leave her husband as planned, I didn’t ask why she wasn’t leaving, I surmised that there may be many factors. Perhaps, she like the other abused women needs time to decide the future she wants to have with or without her husband. Strong Sacrifice told me she’s looking to become an LPN, but seemed to be more comfortable working off the books as a companion than getting a job in the formal sector. Strong Sacrifice said that she wanted a light case so that when she starts school soon she’ll have time to study. After she received her papers, one of the first things Strong Sacrifice did was book a ticket to return home to spend Christmas in Jamaica. Returning home for the holidays in the Caribbean is romanticized by undocumented and documented immigrants but especially for undocumented immigrants, the inability to physically travel home is something they yearn to do once they get straight. In previous conversations, I remember that Strong Sacrifice would tell me she wanted me to go home with her so I could meet her friends, see where she grew up and just hang out, have fun at the beach all day and party all night. When she returned this past Christmas, Strong Sacrifice was not able to go and spend time with friends, go the beach every day and go to dances, instead she lamented that she stayed with her husband’s family. Since her husband’s family lived near a beach located outside of the tourist areas, she complained that beach erosion just left a little strip of land, not even enough to lay out in the sun on, I sensed that even though she was very happy to return home, the trip was anticlimactic. In fact her eyes revealed more sadness, and I couldn’t tell if all the sacrifice was worth it, so I asked her if it was.
Sacrifice replied with a heavy sigh and then shook her head yes. I asked if she was sure, and Strong Sacrifice cleared her throat and said:

“Yes! When mi look back on all di shit weh mi go tru, all di shit weh mi put up wid fi dat one likkle piece of paper, I say yes. It was hard but just to be able to be FREE...Oh you wouldn’t know the burden that was lifted from me when mi get mi papers. Mi just thank God, because without him, I could’ve been in jail, so many bad things, even worse than what I went through could’ve happened but God saw me through, so for that alone, to be free, to travel, to go anywhere I want and not be scared I’m gonna get deported, it was worth it...To have my freedom was worth it.”

She did not complain about her abusive husband so I hope that things got better for her, ultimately, only time will tell. Strong Sacrifice also revealed that she’s anxious to become a citizen because she wants to vote: “Christine, I so want to vote for Hillary and I missed being able to vote for Obama, but if God spare life, I will be able to vote for another Black man or a woman to be president of America before mi dead.” Perhaps the reason for her staying in an abusive relationship may be because she wants to get her citizenship. If she stays with her husband for the next three years she can become a U.S. citizen, but if she leaves after getting her documentation, she must wait 5 years before she can obtain citizenship. Strong Sacrifice has endured so much to get her papers; perhaps she thinks a few more years with her husband won’t kill her.
Blessing, like Strong Sacrifice received her papers, and it was strange to visit her and see her mail sitting on her dining room table addressed to Blessing in a different name. It was like she was a completely different person now that she had her papers, but in many ways she was still the same. She was still traveling to Connecticut to do live-in work, and performing live-in work on the weekends but told me she was actively looking for something in the city that paid well and on the books for her social security benefits. Due to our busy schedules, I visited Blessing for a few brief visits before the holidays and observed that like Strong Sacrifice, she too, had made plans to return home. Blessing was so excited to see her mother for the first time in over ten years that her eyes sparkled, and you could hear the elation in her voice when she spoke about going home. She told me she planned to surprise her elderly mother who is in her mid-80s. Blessing told me that when she spoke to her mother, her mother feared that she would die and not see her daughter before she “left di earth”. Blessing smiled and said, “little does she know I’m going to surprise her and I just pray I don’t give she no heart attack!” I laughed and looked around Blessing’s apartment and saw piles and piles of non-perishable food and toiletries. Tropical storm Erika devastated the island in August 2015 and caused significant damage. Shipping companies offered to ship barrels to Dominica at a discount, and the government of Dominica absorbed the costs to clear all barrels shipped to Dominica. Combined with returning home for the first time in 10 years, Blessing also had to show her family that she was doing better than when she left, so she shipped 10 barrels home which appeared to symbolize a barrel for each year that she’d been gone. I imagine that with the tropical storm’s destruction, Blessing’s return home was met with great enthusiasm.

I visited Blessing after the holidays and I asked what she did when she was home and Blessing spoke about having a family lunch on Christmas Eve at her mother’s house. She said
everyone in her immediate family was present, and it was the first time in over 10 years that she
got to sit down and have a meal with all of her children. Blessing told me that the luncheon will
stay with her forever. I asked Blessing if it was worth it? Blessing paused and replied “yes”.
“Christine, I just want to get a better job and live a simpler life. I only doing these two jobs for
him you know?” Blessing pointed to her son Quiet with her lips, and folded her hands across her
chest and said:

“He have one more year of college, and I think I will move down South. New
York is too crazy, too congested, too stressful. I ready for a slower pace, and all I
want is a good job, so I can get mi likkle social security and go home whenever I
want. I tell he [Quiet], he got one more year of college then he on he own to mek
life for himself. He does have a likkle job now, so now is my time. I just worried
about finding another job, nothing heavy you know, because Ise too old to be up
and down, sinking and floating for dese kids, I put dem ALL through school
working in dis country. I promise dem all a college education and dey all gon’
have ‘em!”

Prayerful’s, Strong Sacrifice’s, and Blessing’s journeys reflect the sacrifice that many immigrant
mothers make when they sojourn to the United States or migrate anywhere away from home.
The have visions for a better future for themselves, but often work extremely hard to make sure
their children have even better lives than they did. Carole Boyce Davies in Black Women,
Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject, begins the text with the premise that her
“mother’s journeys redefine space.” That space allows for an assemblage of identities and movements created between here and there which defies borders. Many of the women, documented or undocumented, create, define, and re-create spaces and identities for themselves in order to attain larger goals. These goals at the onset of their journeys from the Caribbean didn’t seem so difficult to meet.

This study provides a series of intimate portraits about being immersed in a foreign society in which Blackness born from U.S. systemic racism is unfamiliar and strange yet they must wear this cloak everyday while their diasporic understandings and Black identities born from the tree of colonialism requires a different carriage and comportment. These Afro-Caribbean participants negotiated and continue to re-negotiate their multiple identities as means of survival for themselves and their loved ones. This re-negotiation comes in complex and nuanced forms, from re-negotiated Caribbean gender roles and gender norms to fit lifestyles in which Afro-Caribbean women seem primed for the service sector pipeline to re-negotiating understandings of class and status from the Caribbean to fit new class and status roles in the U.S. These negotiations and re-negotiations entail engaging in abusive dynamics in their personal and professional lives while they wait for better circumstances to arise, or until they find those better circumstances themselves. These personal exchanges occur when trying to attain decent healthcare when one lives in a nation in which their lack of access to resources ensures that they belong elsewhere even though these Afro-Caribbeans are here in the U.S.

Negotiations and re-negotiations occur outside of the work environment, inside the work environment, when they are looking for work, performing work, establishing boundaries at work, and even when they decide to leave work in anticipation of the papers that are on their way. And

then they must re-imagine who they will become as women as they undergo the process of becoming documented. Even for the women who are documented, their identities and lives are not immune to transformation, and many of the participants have to re-negotiate their retirement and make sacrifices and in some cases continue working after retirement. While this study didn’t focus on retirees, there’s a whole segment of Afro-Caribbean women who came to the U.S. as documented immigrants, many of whom began their careers in the service sector, or began their careers in white collar industries and in post-retirement find themselves working as nannies, babysitters, and companions to the elderly and disabled to make ends meet because their social security benefits and pensions are insufficient. This reality for documented Afro-Caribbean retirees is not the same reality for undocumented women. These women diligently search for cases in which the responsibilities for the patient or client require minimal lifting. Or some of these women end up becoming babysitters for relatives and if they are lucky find work taking care of newborns. Further research is required to truly grasp the future that many middle-aged undocumented and documented Afro-Caribbean women are working towards.

For younger Afro-Caribbean women and immigrant women of color, their entry into the service sector is both visually and literally daunting. I pass these young women many of whom are recent high school graduates, as they rush to school, work, and training programs, much like the generations before them did. However to see the streets of the Northeast Bronx peppered with young women in different colored scrubs looking thoroughly exhausted, wearing ill-fitting wigs that sit on their heads awkwardly is disconcerting. It’s almost as if the wigs and the uniform combined are a costume of oppression that don’t fit on the frames of these young women, many of whom are still in their late teens and others not even 21 years old yet. On occasion, I stop and ask a young woman if she’s going to school, and too often the young women
reply that they’re hoping to save up enough money to go to college or they took a break after one
semester or a year and hope to return to school. Every month, I am stopped on my way to the
train by African, Asian, and South Asian young women looking for directions to a nursing home
or private residence. They’re usually meeting a client for the first time, or going to a job
interview at one of the nursing homes in the area, these young women tell me they’re “coming
all the way from…” Brooklyn, Queens, Chinatown, and they “have other cases” in another part
of the city but they “need to be on time because” their case is only for 1 or 2 hours. I give them
directions and then walk away feeling bewildered and sad that these young women could be the
granddaughters of my older generation of participants, and they are being exploited. Their time
is not being valued working for minimum wage and traveling 90 minutes to 2 hours only to earn
1 hour of pay. I wonder what will have to be negotiated and re-negotiated for this young,
underpaid, and uneducated workforce. Only time and future research will tell.

While writing the conclusion, I decided to finally get a haircut after three years. I walked
down White Plains Road on an early Tuesday morning and while a few businesses were open,
the usual hustle and bustle energy of the area had yet to begin so early in the morning. I walked
into the barbershop and there were two fathers waiting with their toddler sons for a haircut.
Philosopher hadn’t arrived yet and I would be his fourth client and it wasn’t even 10 a.m. I
waited patiently and was immediately immersed in a discussion of the 2016 political election
with Gentle Giant and his customer. As I sat and waited I played with one customer’s child who
kept kicking off his shoes, and also listened to these fathers discuss politics before joining the
conversation. Gentle Giant talked about the viability of candidates and after 20 minutes of
conversation, Philosopher arrived. He asked who was waiting for him, and the order that we
came. Gentle Giant interjected claiming that two men should go before me, but Philosopher
corrected him and said that he was getting his breakfast at the bodega on the corner when I arrived and knew that I shouldn’t have to wait any longer. I appreciated Philosopher’s fairness and that he respected me enough as a customer not to follow Giant’s sexism. After a half an hour, I sat in his chair for the first time in three years and it was very heartwarming to see that the culture of the barbershop had not changed, and I was able to capture a side of Black culture that is typically not seen. Some men arrived in business suits, some came in uniform during their break, others with kids, to converge thoughts and ideas about politics, foreign policy, and popular culture. This study examined Afro-Caribbean women in spaces outside of work and captured the myriad ways that Afro-Caribbean women create intimate spaces for themselves, similarly the barbershop continues to be an intimate space for fellowship among men too.

I’d like to end with an update on Sophisticated Palava. I called her one day last fall and we went for lunch at diner in White Plains. I asked Palava how she felt about her position in the healthcare field and if she planned to complete her degree in physical therapy that she started 20 years ago. Palava emphatically replied:

“No Sah! No way! I’m almost 60 and I just need to focus on earning enough money to pay into the system. I’m too old to go back to school, plus my job is stressful and involves a lot of paperwork. My manager is a white woman and she’s a piece of work, so in addition to making sure the clients have the correct medications, and have attended all their doctor’s appointments, I have an inordinate amount of paperwork to fill out to make sure their records are correct so the clients can keep getting their services. Added to that, dealing with the clients is stressful!”
Christine, you have clients who are considered and labeled as high functioning but in my day in Jamaica we would call them severely retarded because they can’t do anything for themselves...I mean you have grown men and women in their 40s, 50s, 60s, some of them can’t even wipe their ass, and yet, when anything pertaining to them needs to be done, they’re calling the Black workers. Some of them are non-verbal and yet they can still make a very big mess and then point to one of the Black workers to clean it up, even when it’s not our responsibility. I was so disgusted I called a meeting with all the clients at one facility and let them know that “Aide does not mean MAID!” I also let them know that you have maids or housekeepers who come into to clean, aides who come into assist, and you have STAFF! I am STAFF and I am neither a maid, nor an aide! Imagine, dem cyan wipe dem ass, some can’t even speak yet they KNOW it’s the Black one who’s to do the cleaning up. Come ON! I can’t stay in that environment for long, I value myself too much to stay there forever. Granted, I appreciate the benefits, I should earn more for my salary, but you encounter that shit on a daily basis and it wears on you. Don’t worry, I’ve been through too much to get here, but I will be looking for other employment soon. School? School? My heart would like to return but then I look at my age, and although I worked for so many years, none of it went into the system. None of it...”

Palava’s experience encapsulates so many of the journeys and narratives of survival of the participants in this study. Even when the women have worked so hard to reach their goals, they must continue to sacrifice and reconfigure new ends, new beginnings, and new means to meet them. As the healthcare sector continues to grow and wages stagnate, I’m left wondering what
narratives are being created in the interest of present and future physical and financial security. These entanglements of race, identity, class, status, value, migration, and labor are sure to be pertinent in the future as they are now. One can only hope that the sacrifices of coming all dis way will be worth it for the countless Afro-Caribbean women whose stories have yet to be told.
Appendix A: Maps of the Northeast Bronx and Westchester

Map 1: Map of New York City
Map 2: Map of the North Bronx
Map 3: Map of Northeast Bronx Neighborhoods
Map 4: Municipal Map of Westchester County, New York
Appendix B: Literary Engagements of Innocence by Two Female Caribbean Writers Paule Marshall and Elizabeth Nunez

In literature, this loss of innocence and the lingering effects of blatant racism are evident in the character of Miss Thompson in Paule Marshall’s groundbreaking novel *Browngirl, Brownstones*, a coming of age story about a Caribbean girl living in Brooklyn during the Depression and World War II. Miss Thompson is an African American hairdresser and older friend to the main character Selina, a second generation Barbadian immigrant. In the novel one of the most distinctive characteristics of Miss Thompson are the long black dresses that enshroud her narrow body frame and her constant rubbing of her leg due to the pain she feels in her foot. It is not until the 215th page of the 324 page novel that we finally learn the cause of Miss Thompson’s limp when Selina’s childlike and now young adult curiosity prompts her to finally ask Miss Thompson what happened to her leg. Miss Thompson recounts a savage tale of an attempted rape in which she as a young woman visiting her parents in the South had a violent encounter with a southern white man. Miss Thompson recounts a tale of entering a store amidst a throng of white men:

“sitting outside would come looking at me kinda funny, especially one big red cracker with a shovel. One time he come saying: ‘Lord, this here is one of them uppity niggers. Done been up North and got herself a white boyfriend.’ They just whooped and hollered at that. But they laughing was ugly. I knew what crackers give so I went on in that store quick, got what I wanted and then lit through the
back. But that cracker with the shovel must of been thinking for me 'cause there he was up the road apiece, smiling and making dirty signs…”156

Marshall describes Miss Thompson’s demeanor before she continues telling her story to Selina, “[s]he paused and looked meditatively at Selina, then shifted, sighed and said flatly, “He didn’t get to do nothing with me wrassling and hollering, but he did take a piece clean outta my foot with that rusty shovel.””157 Marshall writes of Miss Thompson, “she tapped the foot lightly with her cane, her gaunt face impassive.” What is most intriguing about Miss Thompson’s narrative is not that she must live with this limp for the rest of her life or that she may possibly lose her foot if the sore continues to fester untreated, but that her limp is the one thing that identifies or rather marks Miss Thompson.

In Marshall’s descriptions we know that the thin woman walking down the street in a loose fitting, long, black dress walking with a limp and eventually a cane is Miss Thompson, and while the community or her customers may not know her story of her violent encounter with racism, there is a haggardness that marks Miss Thompson and one wonders if it was a result of her Southern experience as she was marked blatant racism. Not wanting to taint or ruin Selina’s innocence, Miss Thompson waited to tell Selina her story for fear that Selina wasn’t old enough, and while she insists after her story that she knew more happy and carefree times, noting “Don’t think I was always old and hard and rusty. And don’t think there wasn’t plenty of mens wanted to marry me neither! Somebody was always in love with me and I was always in love!”158 Despite Miss Thompson’s assertion of happiness, there is a melancholia and haggardness that shrouds Miss Thompson to the extent that we are introduced to Miss Thompson by a quote from

156 Marshall, Ibid.
157 Ibid
158 Ibid
Selina’s mother, Silla: “Poor Thompson. Somebody mussa put she so that she does break down to support somebody else’s wild-dog puppies, instead of taking care of that life-sore pon she foot.” Silla’s quote implies that Miss Thompson’s haggard demeanor must be the result of obeah or necromancy. No matter how much wisdom Miss Thompson doles while tending to her client’s hair for hours on end, we know that her limp, denied her of a life that could have been, an innocence never to be regained.

Based on Marshall’s description of Miss Thompson, we know that while she is not from the Caribbean, her experience in the segregated South was an introduction to a different form of Blackness, one that did not include the luxury of being safe and protected around white men, but a Blackness in which Black female bodies were always vulnerable to rape in what Darlene Clark Hine refers to as a culture of dissemblance; a culture in which Black women must always be cognizant of the dangers of rape and conduct themselves accordingly for protection. Miss Thompson attempted to protect herself by exiting via the back of the store but to no avail, she was forced to deal with the violence of an attempted sexual assault. So we see that blatant racism and racism are inescapable for the Afro-Caribbean immigrants who live here, and in the African American literary characters of Caribbean women writers. In Miss Thompson’s telling of her narrative of both violent and blatant racism, the young woman Selina is introduced to a different form of racism via Miss Thompson’s reality in the U.S. South. Elizabeth Nunez, introduces her main character to what may be the harsh reality of racism in the U.S. Midwest. Like Marshall, Nunez utilizes an older Black woman as the vehicle to disrupt the innocence in her young female Caribbean character.

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159 Ibid., 27
In Elizabeth Nunez’s novel *Beyond the Limbo Silence*, we are introduced to a young Trinidadian woman, Sara Edgehill, who is given a scholarship to attend a Catholic college in Wisconsin in the 1960s. The novel follows Sara from her life in Trinidad to her life in Wisconsin, as she comes into adulthood under the auspices of nuns and complex racial encounters. Sara’s introduction to racism comes soon after her arrival to the United States over the course of a few days with experiences in two different states. Her first experience is in the taxi-ride to Jamaica, Queens with a family friend, Mrs. Clancy, who hurls the term “monkey chasers from the banana bush” at Sara several times as they travel from the airport to Mrs. Clancy’s home. Sara notes:

“The violence in her [Mrs. Clancy’s] voice and the anger that flared from her eyes released the tears I had stoically dammed behind my wall of silence during that drive to Queens, and now they rushed down my cheeks uncontrollably. I had arrived in the country of the Americans, the fable place of money, big cars and beautiful mansions, and all I saw around me was clutter—the clutter of brick houses leaning against each other, broken-down cars, twisted metal lining the pavement, people huddled at the corners of treeless streets. And now she called me a monkey chaser, and my beautiful island home, the banana bush. Father Jones had made no mistake when he told my mother that he had come to Trinidad to find raw talent in the primitive world. That was how this woman saw my world too. I was primitive, between her people, black and white, and me—to such a distance that I experienced an isolation for which even my self-imposed exile into a world of books had not prepared me. The strangeness of the place, the cool, detached weather, the lifeless trees, the squalor of concrete and brick and the brown and gold landscape triggered a longing in me for the radiant greenery I had left, and a sense of loss and regret for my folly, my careless acceptance of the beauty that had once surrounded me, my easy willingness to give it all up…I never could have imagined this utter feeling of isolation into which Mrs. Clancy’s words, spoken to me in the cavernous shadows of the back seat of a taxi, now plunged me, a feeling of being completely severed from the human race.”

In this passage, Nunez engages several issues through Sara’s reflections: (1) the loss of innocence in her first encounter with racism; (2) indication of the Caribbean brain drain, evident

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in the priest seeking intelligent “primitives” to educate in the United States; (3) immigrant incorporation into existing Black communities conflicting with the immigrant imagination of the United States; and (3) experiencing alienation, loss, and unbelonging through migration, but also through the abrupt immersion into U.S. constructions of race and racism. Through the character of Sara, Nunez deftly addresses most of the issues and emotions that impact Caribbean people who migrate. Nunez immerses her character and the reader into the realities of racism and the emotions that result when one cannot escape it.

It isn’t until after they arrive at Mrs. Clancy’s home that Sara realizes that the harsh words were actually a lesson in racism that Mrs. Clancy was giving Sara to prepare her for the blatant racism Sara may encounter attending college in Wisconsin. Sara is only staying with Mrs. Clancy for a few days before she travels to Wisconsin, and Mrs. Clancy decides to immerse Sara abruptly, given her limited time in New York. After Sara’s dehumanizing introduction to racism, Mrs. Clancy then offers Sara an apology: “I shouldn’t have said those words to you,” she said, her voice gentler that I could ever have imagined it. “But it’s best you learn now to be tough. I hope these are the harshest words anyone says to you while you’re here. Contrary to what I said back there in the taxi, this is no bed of roses you fell into, child.” The lilting way she pronounced the word *child* began to chip away at the isolation I had felt minutes ago. The familiar cadence in her speech comforted me and I smiled at her.”

162 Nunez, Ibid.

Prior to Mrs. Clancy apologizing to Sara, the reader is left to assume that Mrs. Clancy is an African American woman preparing Sara for the harshness of life, specifically, blatant racism that Sara may encounter as a Black woman living in the United States, in other words, marking her before white society marks her. To compensate for the brutal assault of words, in her apology, Mrs. Clancy’s affectionate
reference to Sara as “child,” revealing a Caribbean accent, lets both the reader and Sara know that Mrs. Clancy’s 30 years in the United States, has enabled her to call on her Caribbean roots, to remind Sara and also Mrs. Clancy herself, where she comes from, and who she really is, despite her reality.

The alienation and isolation that was brought on by the visual and physical reality of how Black people lived in New York, coupled with Sara’s introduction to racism, served to disrupt her immigrant fantasies of what life would be post-migration. The ability to capture home and all the beauty, and experiences of culture, happiness, and pain living in Trinidad, in one word—child, symbolizes the fragility of the migration experience for Afro-Caribbean women. Traversing Caribbean spaces in search of new lives filled with opportunities, only to have the idyllic portrait marred by introductions to racism, means that from a literary perspective, these Caribbean women writers were trying to capture the realities of many Afro-Caribbean women. That leaving home and escaping socio-economic limitations on success, means entering a new space in which new inescapable limitations are placed on them, which means cultivating new ways of being and occupying identities, those of home and those in the present.
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