Since 1960

Over the past four decades, more than half a million Jamaicans have migrated to the United States, the majority settling in New York City. Jamaicans, along with other West Indian immigrants, have put a distinctive stamp on several of the city's neighborhoods, which have taken on a definite West Indian flavor. In Crown Heights, East Flatbush, the North Bronx, and Laurelton, visitors sometimes feel as if they are in Kingston, Bridgetown, or Port of Spain. The people on the street speak English with a West Indian accent, restaurants advertise patties and roti, and calypso and reggae music blare from car radios. Because of their large numbers, because they are concentrated in particular neighborhoods, and because of their race and distinctive culture, West Indians are having a decided impact on race relations in the city. In turn, their own lives are affected by American society's perception and treatment of blacks. Race—a social identity based on perceived physical features—takes on a whole new meaning for West Indians when they move to the United States. This chapter focuses on Jamaicans, the largest segment of the West Indian immigrant population. I argue that Jamaicans' adaptation to American society is strongly influenced by contradictory pressures—or cross-pressures—
generated by the conflicting demands of holding both a racial identity and a cultural (or ethnic) identity. These cross-pressures and Jamaicans' economic activities determine their place in New York City.

This essay is based on two studies I conducted, one in the 1980s, the other in the 1990s. Between 1988 and 1990, I interviewed, at length, a nonrandom ('snowball') sample of 106 male Jamaican immigrants in New York City. Mainly, I conducted these in-depth interviews in the respondents' homes, although I did some in their workplaces, in my own home, and in other settings such as churches. The respondents, who ranged in age from twenty-two to seventy-two, had lived in the United States an average of 11.5 years. Sixty were in white-collar occupations, forty-six in blue-collar work. I also draw upon a study I conducted in 1999 with a snowball sample of thirty-seven second-generation West Indians who were interviewed using a structured questionnaire. Most of the second-generation West Indians originally came from New York City. I should note that I am a Jamaican immigrant, and this background (as a Jamaican New Yorker) has, I believe, deepened my understanding of the Jamaican migrant experience.

Migration Patterns

Jamaicans and other West Indians have a long history of migrating to other countries in the search for a better life (Palmer 1990:3). This is not surprising. West Indians come from societies with small, resource-poor economies that are very dependent on more developed societies. Income, wealth, and land are distributed very unequally, and their societies are marked by high levels of unemployment. At the same time, because of tourism, the proximity of North America, and the predominance of America media throughout the region, West Indians are well aware of American affluence and American standards of living. Moreover, U.S. and Canadian investment in the region, as well as the American economy's demand for individuals with particular skills, have also contributed to the flow from the West Indies. In fact, migration is a "flight" response that has become ingrained in the culture of West Indian societies (Broder 1989). This includes not only internal migration from rural to urban areas, but—much more significant—international migration. Once begun, migration also is network driven, a dynamic that is reinforced by the family reunification provisions of U.S. immigration law.

Large-scale Jamaican migration to the United States dates from the beginning of the twentieth century, with these nationals predominating among the 138,615 West Indians who migrated to this country from 1899 to 1928 (Reid 1959:225). New York City—especially Harlem in the first third of the twentieth century—was the destination of choice. The Great Depression virtually halted emigration from Jamaica, but after World War II, several thousand Jamaicans—along with other West Indians—migrated to Britain. This movement to the "mother country" was severely curbed when the British government passed the Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1961. Not long after, in 1965, the Hart-Celler Immigration Act shifted West Indian immigration back to the United States, ushering in the present wave, which still is going strong.

A look at data from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) shows the dramatic increase in numbers after the 1965 Immigration Act. In fact, between 1965 and 1985, the numbers increased to about 18,000 per year, in large part as a result of the political turmoil, high crime rate, and economic recession that characterized Jamaica through much of the 1970s and into the early 1980s. Although the crime rate has declined and the political situation on the island is more stable, the difficulties of making a living continued to lead large numbers of Jamaicans to migrate in the 1990s. One reflection of these difficulties is that the overall Jamaican unemployment rate averaged 16 percent between January 1997 and April 1999. The situation is far worse for women than for men in that 25 percent of Jamaican females but only 10 percent of Jamaican males experienced unemployment during this time (Statistical Institute of Jamaica 1999a, 199b). Quite likely, this marked difference in unemployment rates helps account for the fact that the post-1965 immigration includes a higher proportion of women than men; on the receiving end, it has also been easier for female immigrants to obtain jobs than men—especially as domestics (see, for example, Foner 1998).

Presently, immigration from Jamaica to the United States continues at a high level. In 1998, 15,146 Jamaicans officially migrated to this country—a figure that placed Jamaicans as the eighth-largest group admitted that year and the largest of all West Indian groups. Considering Jamaica's small size, this figure is particularly impressive. An examination of Jamaica's immigration rate (the number of legal immigrants divided by the nation's population) shows that it far outstrips the rate of other large sending countries. In 1992, for example, China's immigration rate stood at 33 per 10,000 of the Chinese population; Jamaica's immigration rate was 75/Only Guyana, at 115 per 10,000, had a higher immigration rate (Heer 1996:86-88). Bear in mind that INS figures underestimate the number of Jamaicans in the United States since they include only legal immigrants. The INS estimates that in 1996, 50,000 Jamaicans resided in the United States illegally. Overall, in that year, at least 300,000 foreign-born Jamaicans lived in the United States.

Although New York City does not draw as many new Jamaican immigrants as it used to, it remains the destination of choice for most Jamaicans who move to the United States. Between 1990 and 1994, 40 percent of Jamaican immigrants settled in New York City, compared to 50 percent in the 1972-1979 period (New York City Department of City Planning 1996, 1999). In the late 1990s, according to census data, some 150,000 foreign-born Jamaicans—approximately half of all Jamaicans in the United States—were living in the five boroughs. Most congregate in the West Indian enclaves of Crown Heights and Flatbush in Brooklyn, in the
North Bronx, and in sections of eastern Queens (Crowder 1999). Occupationally, Jamaican New Yorkers are heavily concentrated in service-sector jobs. English facility has clearly given Jamaicans, and other West Indians, advantages over non-English-speaking immigrants in competing for personal service, clerical, and retailing jobs. Health care is a major employer, particularly of women. In 1990, of the Jamaican women aged 16–65 in New York City who reported an occupation to the census, nearly a third were in the health care field as nurses' aides, orderlies, attendants, or nurses. Many Jamaican women are also found in clerical jobs or as domestic workers. Jamaican men are much less occupationally concentrated than women and are found in a variety of jobs including security guards, truck drivers, construction workers, janitors, and carpenters (see Kasinitz and Vickerman forthcoming for a fuller account of Jamaicans' role in New York’s economy).

A few words are in order about the serial migration pattern that characterizes the movement of Jamaicans to New York. Typically, one spouse moves to New York first and then sends for other family members after becoming established in the city. This migration pattern has implications for immigrants in New York as well as those left behind. When a parent migrates, children are often left in the care of the nonmigrating spouse or with extended family members. To help care for these children and family remaining in Jamaica, Jamaicans routinely send back large barrels stocked with food, clothing, and consumer items ranging from batteries to television sets. In fact, a whole industry catering to shipping barrels to Jamaica (and elsewhere in the West Indies) has grown up in New York’s West Indian neighborhoods. Although serial migration clearly evolved as an adaptation to economic necessity, because usually it is not feasible for all the members of a Jamaican family to migrate at once, and as a consequence of U.S. immigration law that emphasizes family reunification, the fact is that the pattern has drawbacks. It ends up splitting apart families for indeterminate lengths of time, ranging from months to years. Marriages often dissolve as spouses grow apart from each other. And the effects on children can be devastating since they may feel abandoned and develop behavioral problems. Indeed, these problems may continue after children migrate to New York because emotional bonds with parents are often strained when families reunite after years of separation (see Prescod-Roberts 1980; Palmer 1990; Bonnett 1990; Moses 1996).

Race and Ethnicity in New York City

Jamaicans' racial identity as "blacks"—at least in the terms that race is thought of in the United States—and American society’s focus on black skin color have critical implications in shaping Jamaicans’ sense of themselves, and their social relations, in New York. Indeed, the interaction of Jamaicans’ race and their ethnicity creates cross-pressures that influence all aspects of their lives. The concept of cross-pressures refers to situations in which individuals find themselves being pulled in opposite directions, simultaneously, by forces that are equally powerful. Because they are subject to cross-pressures concerning race, influenced by both homeland views and American views of race, their behavior is hard to predict. In some situations, their attitudes and behavior are dictated by values and beliefs they bring with them from home; in other situations, they are influenced by new notions about race that they confront in New York.

Among Jamaicans—and West Indians in general—cross-pressures are created on the one hand by their socialization in a society that deemphasizes race and exerts achievement as a cultural ideal, especially through education. This ideal, although only partially realizable, is strongly held by many Jamaicans and shapes their aspirations for themselves and their children (see, for example, Smith 1965; Foner 1973; Kuper 1976; Austin 1987). The process of immigration tends to strengthen this idealization of achievement by selecting out those Jamaicans who are most motivated. Moreover, the growth of distinct West Indian enclaves in New York City in recent years has allowed Jamaicans and other West Indians greater opportunities than in the past to replicate West Indian culture in New York City. In short, Jamaican immigrants in New York City tend to be individuals who have been shaped by the peculiar history, culture, and social structure of their homeland to view life as a series of challenges that, with enough self-effort, can be overcome to attain success at the end. However, once they arrive in America, many Jamaicans find that race presents a much greater challenge than anything they have been accustomed to. They begin to understand that being “black” is perceived much more negatively here than in Jamaica. The gradual and painful process of learning, firsthand, about everyday discrimination against blacks is the other side of the cross-pressures equation. Whereas Jamaica’s history, culture, and social structure, and the very act of immigration, lead Jamaicans to idealize achievement, the realization that blacks—including Jamaicans—experience routine discrimination in the United States makes them understand that this achievement cannot be divorced from the larger struggle for social justice for all blacks.

The Jamaican Background

To better understand the nature of the cross-pressures that Jamaican immigrants experience, it is helpful to briefly examine the factors in Jamaica that have shaped their ideas about race and the kind of ethnic identity they bring with them to New York. Essentially, cross-pressures for Jamaican immigrants develop because Jamaican society de-emphasizes ascribed characteristics—race being the most important one—and stresses achievement through education. That this should be the case is ironic given Jamaica’s history. Historically, race has been central to Jamaican society because Jamaica developed as a plantation colony based on African slavery, and even after emancipation, the British dominated the political and economic order for over a century more. This long period of imperial domination left its mark on a social structure in which blacks have long been subordinated—as slaves until 1834 and afterward as a struggling peasant class. The social struc-
ture resembled a pyramid in which subordinated blacks—the mass of the population—formed the base, and a small white elite enjoyed wealth, power, and prestige. In between these two groups was a mulatto group that, though of mixed biological ancestry, was culturally European (Lewis 1968; Curtin 1970). The Jamaican population also contains three other minority groups—Jews and other people of Middle Eastern descent, Chinese, and East Indians.

Although slavery in Jamaica led to the development of antiblack stereotypes and discrimination, these have not been as all-encompassing as those experienced by African Americans. In fact, powerful forces in Jamaica have tended to offset black subordination in such a way as to make race seem unimportant. First, from a demographic point of view, blacks far outnumber any other group on the island, constituting anywhere from 75 percent to 90 percent of the population. This demographic dominance by blacks is very significant, in that it means that the average Jamaican is accustom to seeing blacks at all social levels—from prime ministers to homeless people on the street. Moreover, since World War II blacks have increasingly been upwardly mobile because of foreign investment in Jamaica and the gaining of independence from Britain in 1962. Because of these realities, Jamaicans tend not to link achievement with race. Also, demographic dominance of the population means that Jamaicans see black skin as “normal,” in the way that white skin is “normal” in America. It also means that present-day Jamaicans do not usually experience the blatant discrimination that was more apparent in Jamaica under colonialism and that blacks in the United States still routinely face.

In addition to demographics, a second important factor deemphasizes race in Jamaica: political leaders officially promulgate the notion that Jamaica is a diverse society in which different races coexist peacefully. The most concrete manifestation of this is the national motto: “Out of many, one people.” The Jamaican political system reinforces these sentiments because it is based on a two-party model that draws its strength from a coalition of different classes. The system studiously avoids appeals to race, thereby helping to prevent the subject from becoming a public issue (see, for example, Stone 1972, 1973; Nettleford 1978; Palmer 1989). The other side of this official subordination of race is the institutionalization of education as the major means for attaining upward mobility. In the Jamaican context this refers not simply to book learning but also to characteristics such as speaking standard English, good grooming, and being law abiding. The main importance of “education” so conceived is that despite its obvious ideological connotations, many—if not most—Jamaicans accept and try to practice this cultural ideal (see, for example, Norris 1962; Kuper 1976).

A third factor also serves to downplay race in Jamaica. Unlike in the United States, Jamaicans never accepted the view that race is a question of being “black” or “white”; nor have they embraced a “one-drop rule” that posits that all individuals of even remote African ancestry are “black.” Instead, as noted before, the mixed-race segment of the population has always been accepted as distinct from either blacks or whites. Moreover, in defining race, Jamaicans have tended to consider not simply physical features but also ancestry, education, social class, occupation, and wealth (see, for example, Henriques 1957). A person with dark skin who is highly educated, is wealthy, and holds a prestigious occupation is recognized for these characteristics—and is not stigmatized on the basis of his or her skin color. This multifaceted approach is reflected in a tendency to focus on skin shade instead of differences between distinct “racial” groups. The upshot is that despite Jamaica’s history of subordinating its majority black population, Jamaicans generally dislike viewing the world in racial terms. An unspoken taboo exists about speaking out forcefully on racial issues, and individuals who break this taboo find themselves subject to harsh criticism (see, for example, Nettleford 1978; Post 1978).

Jamaican Ethnicity in New York City

Jamaican immigrants’ ethnic identity in New York City is strongly conditioned by their premigration experiences in Jamaica and their concentration in New York neighborhoods with other West Indian immigrants. Their sense of “Jamaican-ness” overlaps, to a great extent, with a sense of being West Indian. For instance, in my research many respondents used the term “Jamaican” and “West Indian” interchangeably. That they continually rub shoulders with other West Indians in New York City—especially those from the English-speaking Caribbean—shows Jamaicans their commonalities with these other West Indians. Whereas in the West Indies people often think of themselves in nationalistic terms as “Jamaicans,” “Barbadians,” or “Trinidadians,” in New York City the similarities between these groups become very evident. The reality that Jamaicans share a common history, language, and university as well as cultural elements with other English-speaking Caribbean immigrants, combined with their living in the same New York neighborhoods, creates a feeling that, in New York City, cultural differences among West Indians pale in comparison to their cultural similarities. Perhaps the single best example of this shared sense of ethnicity is the annual Labor Day parade along Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn, which draws participants from every country in the West Indies. The flip side of the coalescing of a West Indian identity is the realization that Jamaicans and other West Indians differ, in significant ways, from African Americans, whites, and other groups.

The most important element in Jamaican (and West Indian) ethnicity in New York City is a self-perception that Jamaicans are hard-working, goal-oriented, success-driven individuals—in short, achievers. At the same time, because of their premigration experiences, Jamaicans often wish to downplay race. It is not that they try to shy away from their African ancestry. Rather, they usually try to point out that they have a different, more positive, view of what it means to be “black” than Americans. Whereas Americans often have a generalized negative view of “blackness,” Jamaicans are accustomed to seeing blacks occupy all levels of their society and, especially among recent immigrants, they tend not to perceive race
as a bar to upward mobility. Indeed, the process of migration usually causes Jamaicans to focus very intensely on achieving upward mobility and, consequently, they often view American society's tendency to consider race first as being a hindrance to their goals. The opinions of one middle-aged engineer are a good example of these orientations. He expressed disgust at the prevalence of racial stereotyping of blacks in America and argued, instead, that people should be judged strictly on the basis of their qualifications:

I think a man should be qualified for a job... I don't want a job because I'm black. I want a job because I'm qualified... If you make an application here [for a job], they want to know your race. What the hell with my race? I feel right away that you're going to judge me off of that and I am at a disadvantage there. I'm a man! Do I have the qualifications? That is what you must find out.

This emphasis on qualifications is typical of Jamaican immigrants and consistent with Jamaican society's stress on education as the legitimate means for attaining upward mobility. Another respondent—a chemist—put the situation this way:

I think we [West Indians] refuse... to really get caught up in the whole racial issue... although we are being treated the same way racially. Our thing is... to forge ahead just the same... Since... we... grow up... [with] a more socioeconomic issue in the West Indies—we are not that sensitive to racism; although some, you know, is pretty blatant that you just can't refuse from knowing that it is racism.

Jamaicans measure achievement in New York City in educational, occupational, and material terms; not only in comparison to others in America but, perhaps more importantly, in comparison to Jamaican standards. In other words, they always compare where they are now with where they were, or could have been, in Jamaica. Because of this (recall Jamaica's high unemployment rates), despite the hard work that is necessary to get ahead in New York City, many Jamaicans believe that migrating to New York City was the right decision. To some extent, official data support this optimism. According to 1990 census data, the median household income of New York resident Jamaicans stood at $45,088 compared to $30,700 for African Americans. However, it is important to note that these data hide a great deal of variation. Not all Jamaicans are doing well economically in New York, and no doubt what accounts for the relatively high Jamaican figure is the many people working in each family. For Jamaican immigrants home ownership is the most tangible sign of economic success. In 1990, according to the census, nearly a third of Jamaican New Yorkers were homeowners (Grasmuck and Grogan 1997), and indeed some of the people I interviewed prided themselves on owning several houses. Not surprisingly, Jamaicans in the North Bronx and eastern Queens, who are better off economically than their compatriots in Brooklyn, are also more likely to own their own homes.

Another important aspect of Jamaican ethnicity is a tendency toward conservatism on social issues. This dovetails with Jamaicans' general desire to emphasize race and, to some extent, stems from the colonial-influenced values that have become ingrained in Jamaican culture. This social conservatism is ironic because of the common portrayal of Jamaicans as hedonists and troublemakers, but it manifests itself in a variety of ways. For instance, their attitudes toward law and order issues tend to be conservative, since Jamaican culture emphasizes respect for authorities and the police. This reflects the need under colonialism—and in present-day Jamaica—to manage conflict between "haves" and "have-nots" (manifested in high crime rates) in a society with high levels of social inequality. State-sanctioned violence (i.e., police violence) has been one way of accomplishing this goal; patronage, directed toward the lower classes through the established political parties, has been another. Socialization to accept the status quo has been a third, and very significant, mechanism for containing social conflict, and respect for law and order has been a crucial component of this socialization. Of course, such socialization is more readily apparent among middle- and upper-class Jamaicans, and the prevalence of poverty means that many poorer Jamaicans continually challenge the legitimacy of the status quo. Nevertheless, the society also socializes these Jamaicans to respect the status quo, and the measure of the success of this socialization—and of the other means of suppressing social conflict—is Jamaica's relative stability as a society. Some of the Jamaicans I interviewed displayed a decidedly law-and-order bent when they argued that some young Jamaicans who had migrated in the 1980s were ruining the image of Jamaicans through their criminal activities. In the view of these respondents, the police rightly target such individuals for prosecution.

A second example of Jamaicans' social conservatism is that male Jamaican immigrants often hold a "traditional" view of family life since they perceive themselves as heads of their households and expect their wives to do such household chores as cooking, washing, and cleaning. Though not as easy to link to colonial-influenced values, these attitudes are definitely premigration in origin. As in Jamaica, male Jamaican immigrants expect their partners to do household chores (see, for example, Ososky 1966:134). These attitudes came through when some of my respondents complained that American women are too "independent minded" and not good housekeepers. Note, however, that Jamaican women's roles are more complex than the men I spoke to indicate. In Jamaica, women have a long tradition of working outside the home, although they are expected to perform "women's work" in the home. Though male immigrants have the same expectations of their female partners in this country, immigration tends to give Jamaican women more autonomy relative to men—especially since they often migrate first. Women's increased income in New York (relative to Jamaica) translates into
greater power within the household, and this, in turn, can cause conflict within immigrant families where males experience difficulty adjusting to their partners' new status (see, e.g., Foner 1986; Bonnett 1990; Gordon 1990; cf. Hondagneu Sotelo 1994).

Jamaicans' conservative social values also come out in parents' expectations and treatment of their children. The prevailing attitude among Jamaican immigrant parents is that children should be seen and not heard, and, contrary to American mainstream values, corporal punishment is seen as an appropriate, indeed a desirable disciplinary tool. As one second-generation Jamaican high school student put it: "West Indian parents do not tolerate . . . raising your voice to them. . . . You must respect your elders and things of that nature—no matter what: always respect them." Not surprisingly, parents' attempt to maintain this kind of "traditional" authority and to transfer "old-world" values to children often leads to conflict within immigrant families, particularly since the children generally have an attenuated relationship with Jamaican culture and in some cases have been separated from their parents for long periods.

The Impact of Race

Jamaican immigrants' ethnic identity in New York City develops within the context of a society that is highly racialized. In fact, to a large extent, their ethnic identity develops in response to American society's racialization, as they attempt to distance themselves from unflattering assumptions about blacks. In reaction to racism, ethnic identity becomes an alternative avenue of self-definition. The problem is that Jamaicans can only partially extract themselves from American society's generalized negative view of blacks. Even Jamaicans who have lived in the United States for many years have trouble coming to terms with the fact that their skin color has such a negative impact on their daily lives and aspirations. Although, as I have noted, antiblack stereotypes exist in Jamaica, they are relatively mild and have been weakening with time because of the self-confidence engendered by—among other things—black numerical and political dominance, a culture that preaches self-reliance, and the cultural force of strong probolack ideologies such as Rastafarianism and Garveyism. Race, in Jamaica, is not a publicly debated issue; in the United States, race is a public and pressing question. Blacks are a minority group in this country (and in New York City), and, whereas Jamaicans define "blackness" loosely, Americans adhere to a much stricter definition. Perhaps most problematic is that while Jamaicans do not associate race with achievement, Americans tend to view blacks as low achievers. This is particularly painful because the idea that Jamaicans are achievers lies at the core of their ethnic identity in this country.

Because of these contrasts in ideas and experiences with race in Jamaica and the United States, many Jamaicans I interviewed expressed puzzlement, frustration, and even astonishment at their encounters with racism in New York. As other writers have noted, Jamaicans often do not realize what it means to be "black" until they migrate to America; this, of course, refers to the stronger negative sentiments attached to African ancestry in this country compared to Jamaica (see, for example, Foner 1987). As one Jamaican letter writer to the ethnic newspaper the Jamaica Weekly Gleaner put it:

"I'm Jamaican," I say. To which the response is, "But . . . aren't you Chinese?" Well, yes, but what has that got to do with being Jamaican? Jamaicans have a rich heritage, with ancestors of many nations, including Europe, China, Africa, and India. But we have mixed and integrated in such a way that no matter what our color, our primary identity is Jamaican. . . . In fact, most Caribbean people are hardly even aware of racism in their everyday lives. As one Caribbean woman put it, "Imagine, I had to come all the way to Canada to discover I was Black!"

I encountered similar sentiments in my research. For instance, a young computer programmer told me:

Race was important [in Jamaica] but not on a day-to-day basis. The difference I find is that when you get to America, you have to start thinking about race when you walk into the store. . . . In Manhattan you walk into a store; you'll find that people will be following you around. Things like that you have never been accustomed to. To me, what has been a shocker here is to walk on the train and for women to clutch their handbags. . . . That has been, to me, my worst problem to overcome since I have been here.

Another respondent—a truck driver—put it this way: "I am just here four years now [and] . . . I am going to honestly tell you—America is not what I expected. . . . I am having a problem getting adjusted to the American system, per se. Because up here . . . the lifestyle that is America is not me, honestly. . . . It might be too fast for me or maybe it's the city I am in. Maybe it's because I am in New York."

These sentiments result from frequent episodes of antiblack racism—ranging from subtle to blatant—that Jamaicans encounter in New York City. Subtle racism is problematic because it is difficult to prove or to fight. Nevertheless, many of the Jamaican men I interviewed complained that people avoided them on the street or that women clutched their purses when they approached. They also complained of being watched in stores and of being stared at when, on account of their jobs, they found themselves in white neighborhoods. My Jamaican respondents spoke of more blatant discrimination as well—being refused service in public places and threatened or assaulted for racial reasons. (They were certain that race was the motive for the incidents of violence that they reported because their attackers preceded the incidents with racial insults.) Some men reported being stopped and issued racial
insults by the police; many feared that such encounters could result in physical abuse, and as a result they tended to be wary of the police.19

For most of the Jamaican men in my study, the most troubling form of racism involved discrimination in the workplace. Such racism directly attacks their economic well-being, the main reason for migrating to the United States. It also directly attacks an aspect of their ethnicity on which they pride themselves: their competence because of qualifications. Because they come from a society that puts so much stress on educational and occupational qualifications for attaining upward mobility, Jamaicans find it very galling when, despite their qualifications, they are discriminated against in New York. Among my Jamaican respondents, racial incidents in the workplace varied in detail, but all left a bitter taste. For instance, one accountant reported being fired because he refused to sanction his company’s discrimination against its lower-level black employees. Another—the truck driver I mentioned earlier—told me of confrontations with his immediate superior over the latter’s treatment of black customers. Still other Jamaicans reported being denied promotions for racial reasons. One man summarized the reasons for his difficulties in obtaining promotion: “I was doing the work but I would be in charge of all whites. They didn’t want me to do that.”

Jamaicans’ Impact on New York City

The influx of several hundred thousand Jamaican immigrants has obviously had a significant impact on New York City. New West Indian neighborhoods have emerged—and are expanding. And the growing Jamaican and West Indian presence in the city has consequences for race and ethnic relations, for the economy, and for the dynamics of New York City politics.

Relations with African Americans

The conflicting demands of holding an ethnic identity as Jamaicans/West Indians and a racial identity as blacks—the cross-pressures I have referred to—particularly affect relations with African Americans. The effects of cross-pressures show up most clearly in Jamaicans’ tendency to alternate between distancing themselves from and identifying with black Americans. While much has been made of apparent conflicts between these two groups—and certainly they do exist—the conflicts have to be understood within the context of a society that discriminates against all people of African ancestry. In fact, Jamaicans and other West Indians also feel strong solidarity with African Americans on many issues.

First, consider the distancing side of the equation. For Jamaicans, cross-pressures are particularly acute because most Americans make few distinctions among people of African ancestry, regardless of their origins. In response to this, Jamaicans assert their ethnic identity to show that they are different from African Americans. Some Jamaicans even assert that they are “superior” to African Americans.

Typically, distancing centers around questions of race and achievement, personal behavior, and family issues. My Jamaican respondents often stressed that they differ from many African Americans, especially poorer ones, in being hard and consistent workers. They also claimed that they make the most of the opportunities for upward mobility that present themselves in America. Moreover, they expressed disdain for welfare and were critical of those young blacks—including West Indians—who commit crimes. With respect to family issues, as I have noted, Jamaicans, particularly Jamaican men, emphasize traditional gender roles, arguing that Americans in general—including African Americans—have too readily abandoned these roles. The result, in their view, has been a breakdown in the traditional family. In fact, most of the Jamaicans I interviewed had married women from Jamaica or other parts of the West Indies.

Despite these beliefs, a number of factors also bring West Indians and African Americans together. Strong cultural affinities exist between the two groups. For instance, black American music, both popular and religious, has long been popular in Jamaica;18 the Black Power movement exercised a powerful influence on Jamaican young people in the 1960s; and American heroes of the black struggle against discrimination such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are widely admired in Jamaica (see, for example, Palmer 1989).

Even more important than these cultural affinities are the firsthand experiences of racial discrimination that Jamaicans encounter in New York City. Jamaicans and African Americans tend to live in the same neighborhoods—that in itself largely a result of discrimination in the housing market—and commingle to form close friendships. They experience similar episodes of racial discrimination in public (see, for example, Feagin and Sikes 1994; Vickersman 1999) and from the police. And both groups often perceive important social institutions—e.g., the media—as being biased against blacks. In short, Jamaicans find that usually, race trumps ethnicity. Indeed, the longer Jamaicans live in the United States, and thus the longer they are exposed to racial discrimination, the more they identify with African Americans (although they still maintain a sense of distinctiveness as West Indians). One powerful demonstration of this emerged in my research when Jamaicans who were longtime residents of New York City expressed scathing criticism of coethnics who disparage African Americans. They explained that living in a society pervaded with antiblack attitudes and experiencing discrimination had led them to reevaluate their premigration attitudes about race. As one Jamaican put it: “Some of us . . . say we are different . . . but don’t fool yourself, you are judged basically on this [skin color]. . . . So I don’t . . . get carried away; say, well, I am West Indian, I am treated differently. That’s nonsensical!”

As for second-generation Jamaicans, they feel a closer identification with African Americans than their immigrant parents because they are American by birth and because they have assimilated into the African American community. This assimilation is not tension free, since Jamaican immigrants, seeking to counter antihate stereotypes, try to transmit their own emphasis on achievement and pride in their
Jamaicans: Balancing Race and Ethnicity

214

Jamaicans: Balancing Race and Ethnicity

215

with other West Indians, as a distinct ethnic voting bloc. Size is important in the shifting demographics of the city, which has seen the gradual rise in the minority population and the relative decline of the white population. In fact, New York City is now a majority-minority city, and West Indians have contributed to this change by their influx into the city in such large numbers. Overall, foreign-born West Indians comprise more than a quarter of New York City's black population.

The growth of New York City's West Indian population makes black politics more volatile. Because Jamaicans and other West Indians operate under crosspressures, their political responses tend to be more variable than that of African Americans (Kasinitz 1987, 1992; Noel 1998). Admittedly, West Indians do often resemble African Americans in their voting patterns and in their support for candidates who they perceive will advance the interests of blacks as a group. Indeed, for much of their history, West Indian immigrant politicians have presented themselves not as West Indians but as blacks. Among the Jamaican immigrants I interviewed, approximately 75 percent identified themselves as Democrats and voiced strong support for black leaders such as Jesse Jackson and David Dinkins. Polling data show that in the 1989 mayoral elections, 90 percent of residents in highly West Indianized Crown Heights voted for Dinkins (McQueen 1989:6). The Jamaicans I studied advanced three main reasons for supporting black political leaders and the Democratic Party: Black candidates are especially sensitive to the needs of people of African ancestry, whatever their origin; West Indians are proud that blacks are attaining higher office; and Democrats tend to address issues—racial and economic issues, for example—that affect blacks.

Yet West Indians' political behavior does not simply echo that of most African American New Yorkers. Because West Indians tend toward social conservatism, they also feel pulled to issues—such as those relating to "family values" and "law and order"—that are often associated with Republicans. Additionally (and like some African Americans), a minority of the Jamaicans I interviewed argued that bloc voting by blacks for the Democratic Party is counterproductive in that it eliminates the need for politicians to take black votes seriously. In addition, ethnic politics has become increasingly important in West Indian New York. The concentration of such large numbers of West Indians in city neighborhoods has opened up the possibility of political mobilization along ethnic lines (see Kasinitz 1992). A good example of this was the spirited 2000 Democratic primary race in the Eleventh Brooklyn Congressional District between Jamaican-born city councilwoman Una Clarke and the African American incumbent, Major Owens, which exposed fissures between the two communities (Hicks 2000).

West Indians use ethnic mobilization especially effectively when they perceive that their interests as West Indians are being threatened. A case in point occurred in 1996 when three separate laws, each of which contained negative repercussions for immigrants, were passed. The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of April 24 facilitated the easier removal of criminal aliens from the United States...
by, for instance, expanding the category of crimes of “moral turpitude” for which aliens can be deported. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of August 22 among other things barred most legal immigrants from obtaining Supplemental Security Income and food stamps; the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of September 30 increased detention space for deportable aliens and instituted three- and ten-year bars to re admission for aliens deported for living in the country illegally.

Traditionally, Jamaican immigrants have adopted a casual attitude toward becoming citizens. Although they have intended to naturalize at some point, they often have not felt the need to rush the process. For instance, although 35 percent of the Jamaicans I interviewed had become citizens, they had taken an average of twelve years to do so once they were eligible (after five years of residence in the United States). One man had lived in the United States over thirty years before naturalizing. INS data show that 44 percent of the Jamaicans who naturalized in 1996 entered the country before 1985 (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 1996). Many Jamaicans have a sentimental attachment to Jamaican citizenship (see Vaughn 1997:19)—and many are confused about the law, not knowing that Jamaicans can be dual citizens and therefore do not have to give up Jamaican citizenship if they naturalize. Also, some Jamaicans, like a few of the men in my study, deliberately avoid becoming citizens as protest against racial discrimination.

As the cumulative effect of the three 1996 immigration laws sank in, Jamaicans and other West Indians began to change their attitudes toward naturalization. Community activists urged West Indians to discard their ambivalence about naturalizing because citizenship is, among other things, protection against deportation and can potentially give West Indians more clout in city politics through the ballot box.27 As one newspaper story in the ethnic press put it, West Indians “raise their families, pay taxes and make no demands on the elected officials. Because they do not vote in sufficient numbers, they do not command attention” (Weekly Gleaner 1995:19).28 Just how effective the pronaturalization campaigns have been in the West Indian community is unclear, but more citizens means more voters—and thus more support for West Indian politicians. In fact, even before the mid-1990s, West Indian political power was on the rise, with the 1991 election of Una Clarke to the city council.

The Economic Impact of Jamaicans

Jamaican immigrants affect New York City economically by concentrating in distinct occupational niches. These niches have grown up over time and result from a complex combination of the skills, human capital, and cultural preferences they bring with them; the structures of opportunities available to them in the New York economy (including employer discrimination); and the operation of ethnic networks through which employment information and referrals flow (see Kassinitz and Vickerman forthcoming). Health care, as I mentioned, is a major ethnic niche for Jamaicans (especially women), as anyone who has spent time in a New York City hospital or nursing home knows well.

Private household workers, who care for affluent white New Yorkers’ young children or see to the needs of New York’s growing frail elderly population, are also often Jamaican or West Indian. A look at the domestic work niche clearly shows the effects of ethnic networking. Many Jamaicans who emigrated in the early days of the post-1965 influx were women who went into private household jobs. Sometimes these women were sponsored directly by white families, or they were induced to take domestic jobs by friends who were already working as domestics in the New York area. Once these Jamaicans were established, they typically passed on to their employers the names of relatives and friends (Jamaicans and other West Indians) who were also looking for private household work. This created networks of immigrant domestic workers that, despite the relative decline of this niche, have endured for long periods. These networks are sustained by the continued arrival of newcomers from Jamaica looking for work and by the close emotional and financial bonds that develop among West Indian domestics.29 These bonds are often expressed in the formation of rotating credit associations (“partners” in Jamaican terminology), which give Jamaican immigrants ready access to small amounts of capital for emergencies, purchasing consumer items, or even funding businesses (see, e.g., Bonnett 1981; Kassinitz 1992; Johnson 1995; Louis 2000).

West Indians have created another niche for themselves in recent years—the jitney van industry, which provides a service to their own community. To some extent, New York jitney vans are a continuation of a West Indian tradition. In Jamaica and other parts of the West Indies, where public transportation is not as efficient as it should be, an alternate privately owned transportation system has emerged consisting of small vans ("robots" in Jamaican) that ply the same routes as state-owned vehicles. In New York City, West Indian vans face a similar situation; New York City transit buses and trains are seen as expensive and not frequent or fast enough, especially in outlying areas of Brooklyn and Queens. To meet customer demand for better service, West Indian men have brought the concept of a privatized network of passenger vans to New York City.30 Not surprisingly, given their large numbers and previous experience, many of these drivers are Jamaican. But if the jitney van industry illustrates immigrant initiative in the creation of occupational niches, it also illustrates the difficulties that can accompany such initiative. Jitney vans may be faster, cheaper, and more frequent than buses and trains, but they have also been criticized—by some West Indian immigrants—as being unsafe. Consequently, the city council long resisted their legalization and van drivers have been subjected to police harassment, but the newfound political clout of West Indian politicians has led to the legalization of these vans (see, e.g., Tierney 1997:22; Wall Street Journal 1997; Dao 1999).

Although jitney drivers are an example of Jamaican self-employment, the fact is that Jamaicans have not gone into small business in a big way. Much has been
made in the literature about the West Indian genius for business, but actually West Indians have very low rates of self-employment. According to 1990 census data, only 3 percent of New York City's West Indians are self-employed (and 5 percent of Jamaicans) — figures that are below the citywide average (5 percent) and not much higher than the rate for African Americans (2 percent) (Model 1999:17). That this should be the case makes sense in light of Jamaican history and culture, which, traditionally, have promoted education and the professions rather than small business ownership as the vehicle to upward mobility. Also, many Jamaicans report difficulty in obtaining credit, which they perceive as the result of racial discrimination. And racial segregation has concentrated most Jamaicans in the inner-city residential areas, with weak local markets and strong competition from other immigrants (Kasinitz and Vickersen forthcoming).

Finally, a word about whether employers discriminate in favor of Jamaicans—an issue that often comes up in the literature, partly because Jamaicans are often perceived to be the case. My Jamaican respondents, for instance, often argue that employers favor them over African Americans because employers view Jamaicans as harder and more competent workers than African Americans (cf. Foner 1987)31. Although evidence exists to support this position (see, for example, Kaufman 1995; Gladwell 1996; Waters 1999), it is also true that West Indians and African Americans often face similar obstacles in the labor force. As Waldinger (1996) has noted, in New York City's labor market, West Indians—especially males—and African Americans are generally more similar than different, and West Indians' ethnic niches only partially isolate them from racial discrimination. Moreover, as others have pointed out, some of the niches in which West Indians operate—for example, public-sector and personal service employment—are shrinking (see, for example, Johnson 1997; Model 1999). If, as some statistical indicators suggest, Jamaicans and other West Indians do well in New York's labor market, this probably stems less from positive discrimination than from their high labor force participation rate, high incidence of multiple family members in the workforce, the tendency for West Indians to hold multiple jobs, and an immigrant ethos that places a premium on achieving success in America. Census data for working-age immigrants in New York City show that in 1990, 81 percent of Jamaican men and 80 percent of Jamaican women were in the labor force, and a quarter of Jamaican households had three or more individuals in the labor force.

Conclusion

Jamaicans (like other West Indians) are still, in many ways, an invisible minority, often seen as part of the broader black population. Yet they are becoming an increasingly visible and important part of the fabric of New York City life. As I have argued in this chapter, dualities such as this are an intrinsic part of Jamaican life in the city. Sociologist Roy Bryce-Laporte put it well when he argued that "Black immigrants operate—as blacks and immigrants—in the United States under more levels of cross-pressures, multiple affiliations, and inequalities than either native blacks or European immigrants" (1972:48). The cross-pressures that Bryce-Laporte refers to, and that I emphasized throughout this chapter, stem from the intersection in the United States of contending Jamaican and American social patterns—especially the different views of what it means to be “black.” Jamaicans are torn between the views of race they grew up with and the views of race they confront in New York.

As I have argued in this chapter, although race has always been important in Jamaica, powerful forces diminish its impact on daily life. These include the predominance of people of African ancestry in the population, which makes “blackness” “normal” the way “whiteness” is “normal” in the United States. Moreover, traditionally Jamaicans have focused their racial concerns on skin shade rather than on gross physical differences between people. Third, political ideology—especially in the post-independence period—consciously downplays race, in holding that Jamaica is a harmonious multiracial/multiethnic democracy. Furthermore, it posits that social inequality stems not from racial differences but rather from relative degrees of achievement—especially as manifested in educational attainment. Taken together, these factors mean that, for the most part, Jamaicans dislike conceiving of the world in racial terms; and to the extent that they do, they view race as complex and not an insurmountable barrier to black achievement. In contrast to this muted view of race (as seen, for example, in little media discussion of the issue in Jamaica), race is a very public and pressing issue in America. In this country, Jamaican immigrants learn that African ancestry is more stigmatized than in Jamaica, and this stigma carries life-shaping consequences.

Because the most highly motivated and achievement-oriented Jamaicans are the ones who migrate, the cross-pressures produced by these disparate views of race are particularly keenly felt by Jamaican New Yorkers. Cross-pressures shape who Jamaicans are in New York City, but Jamaicans also help shape the city, or, more accurately, the emerging city, because they are living in a New York with a steadily growing minority population. In fact, the new New York City is unprecedented in that, for the first time, the city's various minority groups now comprise the majority of the population (Waldinger 1996).

Along these lines, it is important to note that though present-day Jamaican migration to the city has declined relative to the 1980s, Jamaicans continue to migrate there in large numbers. Indeed, New York City remains the number-one destination for Jamaican immigrants. That this will continue to be the case stems from myriad factors, including Jamaica's continuing economic difficulties; the vibrant New York economy; the ease of travel between Jamaica and New York City; and the city's large, settled West Indian population (the largest in the United States), which helps to ease the difficult process of adjusting to life in America. Some writers view the latter two factors as particularly significant, since they show that West Indian immigration is increasingly transnational. In this view, immigration is becoming increasingly bidirectional, such that immi-
grants routinely engage in social and economic transactions that typically transcend national boundaries (see, for example, Sutton 1987; Schiller, Basch, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999). An important implication of this is that transnationalism, by orienting immigrants back to their homelands, strengthens ethnicity and slows the process of assimilation. Among Jamaican immigrants, this would imply a strengthening of their ethnic identity as West Indians, as the size of their population grows through immigration.

The ramifications of these changing dynamics—demographic and immigrant—on New York City are unclear. As I have noted, in some ways Jamaicans and other minority groups seem destined to gain more freedom to express their distinctive ethnicities. But it also seems true that alongside this greater openness, people of African ancestry will continue experiencing many of the restraints that American society has always placed on them. The likelihood is that Jamaicans will continue to identify with the city's black population on many issues—indeed, second-generation Jamaicans assimilate into the black population. As sociologist Roger Waldinger (1996) has noted, the fates of West Indians and African Americans diverge only partially since, in fundamental ways, both are quite similar because of race. Jamaicans' lives in the New York City of the future will play out against the background of these polarizing and constraining forces.

Notes

1. By "West Indies" I am referring to the English-speaking islands in the Caribbean Sea and to territories in South America (Guyana) and Central America (Surinam and, to some extent, Panama) that are linked to these islands historically and culturally.

2. The second-generation individuals traced their ancestry to several Caribbean nations, including Jamaica, Guyana, Barbados, St. Martin, Grenada, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, and Panama. Averaging twenty-five years of age, 62 percent of the respondents were female, 85 percent were single, and 79 percent were college educated. Sixty-three percent identified themselves as "West Indian-American" and 60 percent came from families in which the annual household income was $55,000 or over. The telephone interviews (only one interview was face-to-face) were tape-recorded (with permission) and, on average, lasted about forty minutes each, although some went on much longer. Twenty-six of the respondents were originally from New York City, and the others lived in Glen Ridge, Long Island; Los Angeles; New Jersey; and Washington, D.C. The parents of these second-generation respondents had lived in the United States for decades, with mothers averaging twenty-eight years and fathers thirty-one years of residence.

3. Note, however, that large-scale Jamaican migration dates from shortly after the emancipation of slaves in 1834, when thousands of Jamaicans migrated within the Caribbean and, later, to Central America in search of work (see, for example, Eising 1961; Richardson 1983; Thomas-Hope 1986; Fraser 1990; and Kasinitz and Vickerman 1999).

4. For instance, in two polls conducted in November 1977, Jamaican political scientist Carl Stone found that 60 percent of Jamaicans responded affirmatively to the following question: "Suppose you got an opportunity to go to the U.S.A. to live; would you go?" Similarly, 59 percent expressed favorable attitudes toward well-off Jamaicans who had migrated to Miami (Stone 1982:63-65).

5. The exact number of West Indians—and subcomponents of that population—in the United States is difficult to calculate exactly because the various methods available do not correspond exactly with group boundaries. For instance, although place of birth is an example of "hard" data collected by the Census Bureau, it is possible that some individuals who were born in Jamaica do not identify as "Jamaican." Moreover, some individuals with Jamaican connections who have lived in other foreign countries—notably the United Kingdom—could identify themselves as Jamaicans but would not be regarded as such. Also, place of birth does not capture second-generation individuals who identify themselves with their Jamaican ancestry. Similarly, the census' ancestry question does not give an exact count of the number of Jamaicans in that some individuals of Jamaican ancestry may hold other identities.

6. Although not necessarily employing the term cross-pressures, the literature on West Indians in the United States has long noted that they are subject to contradictory forces stemming from the peculiar features of their home societies and the prevalence of racism in the United States. For instance, see Reid (1959) and Basch (1987).

7. This variation arises because the socially constructed nature of race makes it difficult to strictly categorize people into fixed groups called "races." As I point out below, several factors affect where boundaries are drawn between groups, and one of the most important of these is social trends. For instance, although mixed-race individuals in Jamaica have long been seen, and see themselves, as a distinctly separate group, the growth of black racial pride has caused many of these people to rediscover their African roots. On a long-term basis the most important causes for this trend have been Garveyism and its offshoot, Rastafarianism. However, in the late 1960s, the American black power movement also influenced Jamaican society. One reflection of these problock trends is that from 1844 to 1960, the proportion of the Jamaican population identified as mixed race on various censuses averaged 18.5 percent. However, the 1970 census records that only 5.8 percent of the population were of mixed ancestry, and the 1980 census reported this figure at 12.8 percent. This fluctuation in the mixed-race population was accompanied, in 1970, by a surge in the percentage of Jamaicans identifying themselves as black (see Bainwhaite 1956; Nettleford 1972; Lewis 1977; Vickerman 1995:25).

8. The University of the West Indies is a regionwide institution with campuses in Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad.

9. The figure for Jamaicans is found in Grasmuck and Grogdem (1997) and that for African Americans is calculated from 1990 printed census data (Social and Economic Characteristics) for New York City (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990).

10. In 1990, 51 percent of Jamaican households in the Williamsbridge-Wakefield section of the Bronx (which contains the highest concentration of foreign-born...